

THE END OF THE LINE

2





## KATRA

*by Debbie Gilbert*

What was lost may be replaced,  
Feelings, logic interlaced.

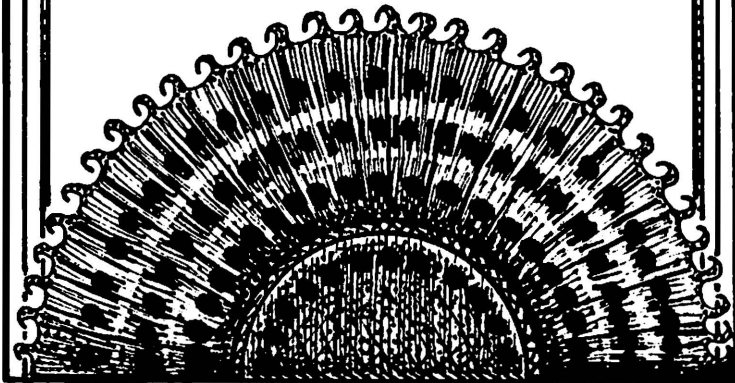
Every part moves to unite,  
Disarray to be made right.

Living forces are combined,  
Fusing body, spirit, mind.

Soul and substance seek to merge,  
Vital powers to converge.

Striving hard to reach the goal:  
That this life should be made whole.

New existence now begun,  
Born to Nome -- the all, the one.





# MIND MELD II

Sandy Zier

editors

Michelle Holmes

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of  
the few... or the one."

The needs of the one outweigh the needs  
of the many... "



Admiral James T. Kirk and  
Captain Spock  
*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*  
*Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*



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❖ DEDICATION ❖

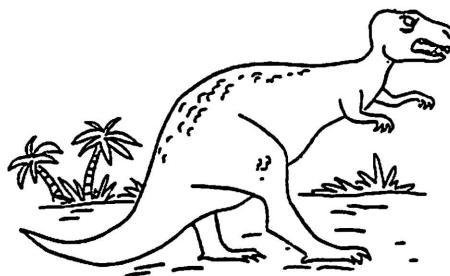
*To absent friends and friends rejoined  
And to those new to fandom... may the  
thrill of discovery never fade.*



A special thanks to Bev and Nancy... for  
"filling in" at the last minute.



...and to Caren Parnes  
for her wonderful  
color cover





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COVER ART: Caren Parnes  
INSIDE FRONT COVER: Debbie Gilbert (Border: Caro Hedge)  
CALLIGRAPHY ON PAGES 17 & 117: Myrtle Jenkins



# EDITORS'

Well, here we are, one year older and no more wiser. It does not seem like it has been a year since *Mind Meld I* came out. Actually it seems longer, so full and busy a year it has been.

*Mind Meld I* received a very warm welcome in fandom, as evidenced by the LoC's following, and sold out in eight months -- a fact that Sandy and I are very proud of. We listened closely to both praise and criticism and have tried to correct any faults there were in the first issue. Of course, we have already started off on the wrong foot, as this issue is over two months late. For this we apologize profusely and say: "we think it was worth the wait."

There have been a few changes in our personal lives, as well, over the past year. Sandy still manages to set records for lack of sleep. For myself, school's end is finally in sight (mid June), and I earned my black belt in Tae Kwon Do. This also produced a change in jobs and I now work for my Karate school.

1984 was also the year of the movie. I think that everything that can be said has been said about *ST III* so I won't bore you with all of my impressions. I loved it and am looking forward -- cautiously -- to *ST IV*.

Well, enough rambling. Enjoy the zine!

*Michelle*

A special thanks to Sandy, who did the brunt of the work on this issue and rarely gets the praise she deserves. Thanks for everything.



# PAGES

Here it is -- finally! Mind Meld II has made it into this world. Though we know we were late - and it seemed one delay just started another, what can I say but '*c'est la vie*'. We appreciate all the understanding and patience everyone showed in waiting for the final product. We think you will be pleased.

We thank everyone who wrote LoCs for Mind Meld I - we tried to listen to all criticism, as well as praise. If your LoC does not appear in the following pages, we apologize. LoC's received after a certain date do not appear because these were typed and ready for print. In general, Mind Meld I was well received and we appreciate the encouragement we were given.

As for the past year - it has been an interesting one. Michelle received her black belt in Tae Kwon Do (Congratulations!) and of course, the movie. What can I say except that I loved it!

As far as thank yous -- I want to especially thank Myrtle Jenkins, a co-worker of mine, who did some calligraphy on very short notice (Myrtle - it looks fine!). Welcome to fandom... I only hope you realize what you're getting yourself into. Also, thanks Mom for doing the proofing and thanks to Michelle for putting up with my various moods, especially the past few months. Also, let me reiterate our thanks to Bev and Nancy -- I hope everyone enjoys **Sawdust in the Stars** as much as I do (whoever said dinosaurs are extinct?). Of course, we thank all of our contributors - you have made this zine possible and your patience in our delays is especially appreciated.

As far as our plans for Mind Meld III (huh?) ... yes there will be a third issue. In fact, we have some special things planned for it. See our ad at the end of the zine.

*Sandy*







# LOCS



## Wendy Montgomery

...A friend lent me a copy of your zine ... I found it fascinating. It is so different from the few I choose to read.

The style of the writing is closer to a professional level than most I partake of. I truly enjoyed what I had a chance to consume.

## Sue Fine

...Let's start with the cover. What can I say? Burnside's done it again.

September Song was a nifty little item...Beverly chose to explore the philosophical side, and did so admirably. I found it very relaxing.

I liked the descriptive facets of Hold Back the Dark. Making the reader feel the gut reactions of the characters is a rare talent...

The Trust freaked me out. Blew my mind. ...I had just seen STIII when I read this one, and boy did it fit like a glove! Then when I read the novelization, complete with the Wake scene, .... Far out!...

Hannibal's Logic was a wierd little story...out of the ordinary...I had to backtrack once in a while, but interesting ... and the concept was fascinating.

The Right Move was short, but sweet. Very nice.

...On first reflection I was sure I would hate The Sunbird. ...Was I ever wrong! I loved it! I can't wait for Mind Meld II to find out what happens. Ms. Weston should seriously consider sending this up to Pocket...it was worth the effort.

The poetry was just fine. I liked what I saw and was glad it did not overwhelm the zine.

The art was superb! Every illo was tastefully and perfectly done. ... From Mary's Mills' delicate pencilings to Carol Swoboda's heavier charcoals.

For what I didn't like... running out of pages!!

...You guys did a terrific job. ...a few typos, none to serious. The layout was appealing, the format excellent. Mind Meld is a nice clean professional-looking publication. In a word - QUALITY.

## Kate Daniels

First...I am most kindly disposed towards MM because I ordered..and you sent it..all in a space of 10 days! Practically unheard of these days!

...produced an attractive-looking zine...good binding job as well as proper title page. Various decorations break up the monotony of page upon page of text. I'm not certain why S. Fine's story is printed in double columns...that sort of thing drives you nuts

...I'm so glad you found the rest of Sunbird...I don't really enjoy the characterizations in [the] story, but the plot is interesting enough to want to know how it ends...Spock married with children is never going to be a winner for me...the warm relationship between Kirk and Spock doesn't come through in their behavior.

...Best of zine for me is "Hannibal's Logic"...original plot, interesting new characters and convincing characterization.

...One story I felt had more promise but needed more editorial guidance was "Hold Back the Dark...not really clear what time frame involved...

What I didn't like about the zine - too much..death and dying. ...of about 30 pieces of poetry/prose, 13 of them concern death. McChesney's admittedly is about death...but it was most thought-provoking...I found it a moving vignette.

One of the most interesting stories in the death section was [The Trust] -- either she's a good guesser or saw some advance material on STIII. ...I hope MMII will have a better mixture of themes - ...please don't take any of this as unkindly meant...after all, it is your zine. And a fine effort - you ought to be proud of your work. I look forward to Issue 2.

Shona Jackson

ARGH...you're making me wait for MMII for the rest of Sunbird!! SNARL...Ah, indeed, the support of your friends and the wise utilization of expert advice and encouragement shows....The first issue of Mind Meld is truly a quality one and a real credit to the thought and hard work put into it. I am delighted ... and the zine is ALL TREK!

The artwork is truly fine. Carole Swoboda's I definitely want to see more of...sensitive, evocative, with a fluidity of line shadow that is eloquent. ERIC's combination of [style] in the drawing of Spock makes for a fine mood-portrait....I like C. Myer's work with Lynn Syck's poem - it's most effective.

..A Spock with a big smile - most illogical and un-Vulcan!! ... but a very nice one.

Lydia Moon's work is new to me...I'd like to see more of her stuff too...

Pauline DeVance

...I enjoyed it and look forward to #2. Having seen STIII...I thoroughly enjoyed The Trust...please reply and tell me that she'll be writing a sequel...

I enjoyed the poetry interspersed throughout the zine.

On The Bequest ...I've always enjoyed that particular episode ... there's a sense of deep compassion and sincerity, with anguish that the good doctor has had to endure.

Sunbird... what can you say about a story that has everything... adventure, love, espionage, depravity, ... loyalty and friendship. I can hardly wait for the resolution of the story.

Mary Busenbark

...The zine was SUPER! Production, artwork, layout, etc, were excellent. A fine quality piece of work.

September Song - beautiful mood piece - a precious piece of time to appreciate.

Hold Back the Dark - a dream within a dream - but too sad. An excellent and well written piece.

Sunbird - perfect!... very satisfying...the beauty and power of Jim & Spock's friendship and love are clearly demonstrated...in a very well-drawn plot. T'Prenn is also well done and evolving relationship is well done...fine reading..of course I'm desperate for the next part. Sarek is super!

Brother of the Heart - Touching, a beautiful story.

The Trust - ... poor Bones! But oh, so beautiful a thing!

The Bequest ... a well developed story and I was pleased by the conclusions.

Last Meld - so painfully beautiful!  
Hannibal's Logic - Fantastic!! Super! .. a completely unique story. Excellent plot and character development...even some very subtle humor.

Afterwards - very touching.

The Right Move - cute!

The Faces of Eternity - painful and beautiful.

By Way of Reply - excellent! And very "in character" for both.

Vision of Death - again, beautiful!

The poetry was all really excellent....The artwork super!

Many thanks for a super zine!...Of course I can't wait for #2.



Debbie Gilbert

...I knew Mind Meld was going to be a good zine ... it had "the look"  
...First-rate artwork is nearly always the hallmark of a quality zine and MM has more than its share...graphics and type are well-balanced.

September Song - Could have been a cozy little mood piece, but the situation is too pat and the dialogue doesn't ring true.

Hold Back the Dark ...I can't resist a paradoxical ending...this one's rather haunting. I had to sort of like the story despite its use of...cliche "it was only a dream".

Brother of the Heart .. I got nothing from this tale.

The Trust ... comes fairly close to STILL's theme, but I hate to see McCoy acting so confused and irresponsible...No reflections on Ingrid.

The Bequest. Interesting idea...I did not find Calandra at all believable...

Last Meld - Not really a story but train of thought... effectively explains Kirk's "I feel young" statement.

Hannibal's Logic - probably takes the honors for zine's best written story. Harriett uses her words to their best effect....does a good job conveying the depth of Kirk's madness.

Afterwards ... I found it difficult to believe that Kirk could punch McCoy in the face and feel absolutely no remorse.

The Faces of Eternity - maudlin.

By Way of Reply ... were I familiar with "Elegy for the Brave", this might have had more meaning for me.

Vision of Death...comforting to see that Spock finds his peace at last.

Sunbird ... a cliffhanger will create a ready-made audience for the sequel. ... a story of galactic

intrigue that holds my interest. Interpersonal stuff is good...can't wait to see the Rodinium Shield overthrown...an old-fashioned good guys vs. bad guys saga.

Poetry. I liked both Mind Meld poems....The tripartite viewpoint of Ginna LaCroix's "The Warning" is effective...as is a sense of "three-ness" in "Trinity". Karen Hayden's work is really prose but arranged to simulate a poem ... did have some insights buried under all the verbiage. ... particularly liked "Journey to Understanding"

Artwork. Cover illo is good, not quite up to the one she did for Kobayashi Maru. I don't care much for the cross-hatch technique on Cami Forsell's drawings. Suzan Lovett - I like it. Barbara Gordon's piece looks like a rush job, as though she didn't care. A. Kunz' - I like this scene very much ... a nice clean look. Caren Parnes is terrific - without question the best artist in the zine. M. Mills -nice composition... Lydia Moon ... excellent...C. Myers...highly competent technique, as always, but big grin on Spock seems out of place. Carole Swoboda dominates the zine...she's such a talented artist ... figures have a soft, childlike glow that is appealing in its own right.

...though my criticisms may at times seem a bit harsh, I did enjoy Mind Meld very much.

Bev Volker

Mind Meld is unequivocally a beautiful zine - not just a beautiful "first zine" - for it holds it own against others which are on their 4th, 5th, etc issues.

Layout is excellent and the care which went into it shows. Titles are straight...varieties of presstype fit the mood or theme of each story. ..Good balance of short and long things with poetry evenly interspersed.

Zine is nicely graphic without being cluttered or overpowering.

No wasted space ... my one criticism to the general over-all appearance is the use of different styles of type among the major stories... Anyway, this was the only fault which was immediately apparent to me and after careful scrutiny.

Thank you for the care of my contributions. September Song looks fine... and I was surprised and delighted with Merle's illo for "Trinity".

The stories...were all consistently good, carefully edited and made the rest of the zine worthwhile. Beautiful trappings, gorgeous artwork, an abundance of presstype, etc, does not a good zine make. For the editor and the writer in me, at least 80% of the success of a zine is the quality of the written material contained ... in this area MM is a success. There was a good variety of themes but always with the emphasis on my favorite (K/S/Mc) so as to make it my kind of zine ... I liked that this is your theme rather than a genzine which is so much wasted space.

Each story has its own merit and the inclusion of Sunbird gives it the weight it needs to make the issue memorable.

You guys have made your mark in fanfiction with MM and I thank you for allowing me to be a small part of its birth. This is the kind of zine we - fandom - needs. Can't wait to see Number 2 begin and I hope I can be part of it. Hate to break it to you ladies, but you have begun an institution (which is where you'll feel like you should be by #4 or #5).

CONGRATULATIONS!

Ginna LaCroix

I think you brought out a splendid first zine. You should be very proud. "Fields of Yesterday," "Trinity" and "Quotes" I enjoyed very much - all had real emotion to them.

Overall, the artwork was good. The last thing I expected was to see my poem illoed. I was very much impressed.

I enjoyed most of the stories. Sunbird really stood out. I hope they do continue - I'm hooked.

It was nice to read an unreduced zine ... personally don't like the column print of The Bequest, which was a fine story.

Sharon Gates

...usually I read a zine, make up an LoC in my head and never get it written. ...in search of zines, I was lucky to find yours.

...it was obvious you put all your love, care and devotion into this zine. The layout was good, ... borders were great and didn't distract. The art was excellent and especially enjoyed Carole Swoboda's and Gennie Summer's work .. but it's hard to choose favorites.

September Song - I enjoy anything by Bev Volker but this was excellent.

Hold Back the Dark - short and wierd. It gave me goose-bumps.

The Trust ... and interesting way to show how Spock worked through McCoy "Remember"

The Bequest - an excellent story. I loved it. ... well thought out, well done that kept everyone in character and believable.

Hannibal's Logic ... strange story, interesting, but not one of my favorites.

Afterwards - I really liked it.

I'm not much of a critic on poetry ... the one I especially enjoyed was "The Warning"

Sunbird ... a fantastic story and I can't wait for part 3. The idea of the Rodinium Shield is plausible. How dare you leave Uhura arrested like that and just quit!!! Dire Vulcan threats on your heads if you don't hurry with Mind Meld II.

Good job on 1, much luck on 2.

Kathy Kimber

I enjoyed MM very much, especially Sunbird. I'd say your first zine was a definite success.

Betsy Fisher

...with one exception, I've never sat down and typed a letter to a fanzine before. In the case of MM I have to make an exception. ... Your zine is the most beautiful in both format and planning that I've ever seen. The printing is fantastic ... borders and decorated edges are eyecatching and just marvelous.

...Your artist, Swoboda, has a knack for facial expressions that borders on the fantastic!

I'm dying to find out what happens to Uhura in Sunbird .. at first I refused to believe in such a conspiracy... but the story is so good that I soon suspended that belief and sat back and enjoyed the reading of it. I look forward to part 3.

"Elusive Emotion" is the type of love and caring that drew me to Star Trek in the first place.

"September Song" made me cry. ... gee, I wonder if the three of them will ever get a chance to do this...

"Question" ... a lot of insight. The art by Lovett is beautiful.

"The Trust" was a great story, although I'm always saddened when someone has a character pile abuse on Kirk ... but the story is excellent.

"Fields of Yesterday" ... touching... the artwork is beautiful.

The piece that got to me the most was Last Meld ... this one is graceful, thought-provoking, and absolutely devastating ... with a shred of hope at the very end .. I loved it!

...Every piece in this zine is worth a reading ... thank you for something that is really top-shelf quality. You are going to get a lot of praise from people.

Caren Parnes

I'm very impressed with the zine - you both did a terrific job! Thank you for the terrific screen job you did on my art. My only complaint is the weight of paper you used ... otherwise I thought it was a very professionally done zine and I liked both the stories and art on the whole.

Caro Hedge

I got Mind Meld and enjoyed it reasonably much. Very nicely put together. I like Swoboda's pencils, but all the layout and art were nice - much nicer than the usual first effort.

Sunbird did me in - I got a "to be continued" twice in the zine ... I couldn't believe it. Yer Cruel!

My favorite of the zine is Hannibal's Logic. She always does take a different look at things. I like that!

Judith Gaskins

Congratulations on the launching of a new ST fanzine. My compliments to you both, to your authors, to your artists and to your poets. I was pleased to find and to read Sunbird ... I like the view of McCoy as a father in The Bequest

Debbie Costa

I picked up a copy of MM at Space Trek and devoured it in two sittings! It is a superb first effort. The novella Sunbird has me on the edge of my seat!

Susan Meinecke

I think MIND MELD is a beautiful zine.

Connie Beasor

I loved reading MM!... so many brilliant pieces. It was refreshing to read a story of our older Kirk, Spock and McCoy in September Song -and so touchingly honest-and humorous. Sunbird angered me (at the

Fleet), delighted me (Kirk and Spock together), shocked me... in other words let me feel - so often lacking in these stories. Carol Swoboda's drawings have the same impact. I couldn't really appreciate the raw anger in McCoy in The Trust ... however the piece was well written. Much more believable was Afterwards... Vision of Death, McCoy on Kirk, Faces of Eternity, Last Meld, Trinity, Fields of Yesterday - all fine, lovely pieces. Artwork by Decker - always a favorite.

I'm enchanted with it. The only negative was the series was not concluded-but on the the next MELD!

**Kathy Daughtrey**

I think it was great... I am looking forward to Mind Meld II... I really want to know how Sunbird ends. The relationship between Kirk and Spock is handled very well shwoing how one cares for the other... [The Bequest] is great... even the stories post ST:TWOK are handled very nicely. Am looking forward to Mind Meld II.

**Andy Thompson**

... I enjoyed it very very much! I am new to ST zines - though a ST fan since 1967.

I have read most of the Contacts and think yours is just as good. Especially enjoyed the Sunbird series... she captured the spirit of the Enterprise crew...characteriza-

tions are perfect and I am anxiously awaiting to see how it all turns out.

...also enjoyed The Bequest ... Also, September Song ... and Hannibal's Logic were well thought out and entertaining.

**Lanora Moore**

...too busy (and lazy) to write a proper LoC but it was very good. It impressed me as being in the tradition of Contact. Keep up the good work!

**Joan Mann**

I have just read MM and have thoroughly enjoyed it... nice selection of stories from different periods of ST history. Thanks for the good job and the quick service. I really enjoyed Sunbird... Good Luck with Mind Meld 2.

**Kathleen Plungis**

There are not many editors who manage to produce a good zine on their first try, but you (Sandy) and Michelle definitely succeeded! MMI was superb!... read it several times already!

... printing, layout, art, designs, poetry and all stories (especially Sunbird) were all first rate and Carole Swoboda's artwork beautiful! Her drawings give a story a life of its own... Carole is extraordinary!

... Looking forward to MMII and conclusion to Sunbird.

*"Humans are very peculiar. I often find them unfathomable, but an interesting psychological study."*

Spock

"By Any Other Name"



# Memoriã Teneõ

I came seeking you  
Through time and stars and space.  
Driven by the haunting  
Echo of one small word.

Remember!

What did you leave behind  
Entrusted to the care of Bones?  
You joined your mind with his,  
Imparting a final message that  
he could not

Remember.

We came to a disintegrating world,  
A planet never meant to be!  
There, in the midst of forces gone amok,  
I lost my son and our Silver Lady.  
This, I pray, you will never,

Remember.

I found my friend of old, yet,  
Not the same at all.  
You looked out of eyes empty of memories.  
Eyes that told me you could not..

Remember.

Still and silent they took you and Bones,  
Up the steps of Mt. Seleya.  
Through the long night I paced,  
With hope and despair as my companions.  
Could they give you back what you had lost?  
Would you ever again

Remember?

You came down the steps and passed me by.  
Anguish closed its icy hand around my heart.  
You lived, but my world was lost.  
You did not

Remember!

Pausing, you turned and came to me,  
And said the words you'd spoken before.  
Slowly at first they came,  
Each word calling up another.  
Looking into your eyes my heart grew warm.  
They told me you did

Remember!

# INSIGHTS

Art: Cami Forsell

By: Ginger Dawson

I look at them together -- one near death,  
the other looking much the same  
and though I am loathe to admit to the feelings  
they are undeniably there -- jealousy, hurt, envy.  
How can I -- Why do I feel this way -- and now of all times?!  
I thought these feelings resolved a long time ago.

Spock may not pull out of this one;  
the odds are certainly against him this time.  
Dear God... please... don't let him die  
Jim couldn't bear that -- not Spock

Look at him.  
He hasn't slept a wink since the accident -- 3 days ago!  
As usual he blames himself.  
Spock took the blast that would have surely killed him.  
And for that Jim will crucify himself.

Damn you Spock!  
Why must you always be so damn self-sacrificing!  
Don't you know he hurts more when you are hurt?

And you Jim...  
you can't take on personal responsibility  
for each of the 430 lives on this ship --  
I know you try to, I know you want to  
But dammit you can't!  
You'll destroy yourself.  
Just like you're destroying yourself now -- for him.

A Vulcan  
who can't even understand  
the value of what you so freely give him --  
of what I'd give my eye's teeth to have  
Spock, have you any idea of how lucky you are?

Of course you do,  
I know you do...  
That was unfair of me.

You are as devoted to him  
as he is to you.  
God only knows how many times you've risked  
life, honor, and more... for him.

What is it  
that draws and binds them together?  
They are as different as night and day --

Jim, so vibrant and alive  
everyone is drawn to his magnetism  
while Spock shuns and shys away  
from any and all forms of personal contact...  
except for Jim's.

I can even understand  
Spock's need for Jim's friendship  
Despite all that talk of Vulcan nonemotion  
he can't live in a vacuum;  
and though he'd never admit it  
he does need Jim.

But Jim...  
What would make him  
seek out friendship in a Vulcan?  
What can he possibly give Jim that...

My musings are intruded upon  
as a moan from the bed draws my immediate attention.

"Jim... ?"

"Spock... ? ... Spock! Bones! He's awake!"

Sure enough.  
I look at the diagnostic readings  
and they are much improved  
(should have known -- that damn Vulcan stamina!)  
I watch them, totally absorbed with each other,  
totally oblivious to my presence,  
the look of sheer and utter relief on Jim's face  
so intense I almost look away.

As weak as he is  
Spock attempts to lift a hand towards Jim;  
the hand is eagerly clasped.  
Some part of my mind rejects this --  
Vulcans don't like to touch  
yet Spock reaches out to Jim.  
Is this what Spock gives him?  
Is this what Jim needs?



I feel like an intruder  
witnessing this private exchange.  
His joy unbounded,  
Jim turns and smiles openly -- at me.  
For some strange reason that surprises me  
and I know it should not.

I ask, "How do you feel Spock?"  
He is weak, and a little disoriented  
but his dark eyes search out mine.  
A rare openness and vulnerability,  
he would never normally permit me to witness  
is in them now, plain to see in their  
dark depths.

A slight smile touches his lips in  
response to my question  
and it touches a chord deep inside me.  
A smile, so simple a thing --  
from anyone else but him.

And I suddenly realize  
what was right there for me to see  
all along..  
that that damn Vulcan is my friend  
and I need him too.





# WE COME TO SERVE

*By: Ginger Dawson  
Art: Cami Forsell*

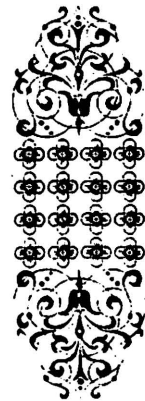
He sits  
waiting,  
a majestic figure carved in stone.  
Dark, forbidding  
judgment is his now  
and his alone.

Grown has he  
from uncertain, questing child  
to the revered leader of all we are.  
Years of self-questing, self-searching and denial  
have forged his near omnipotence  
his inner strength  
his inner eye.

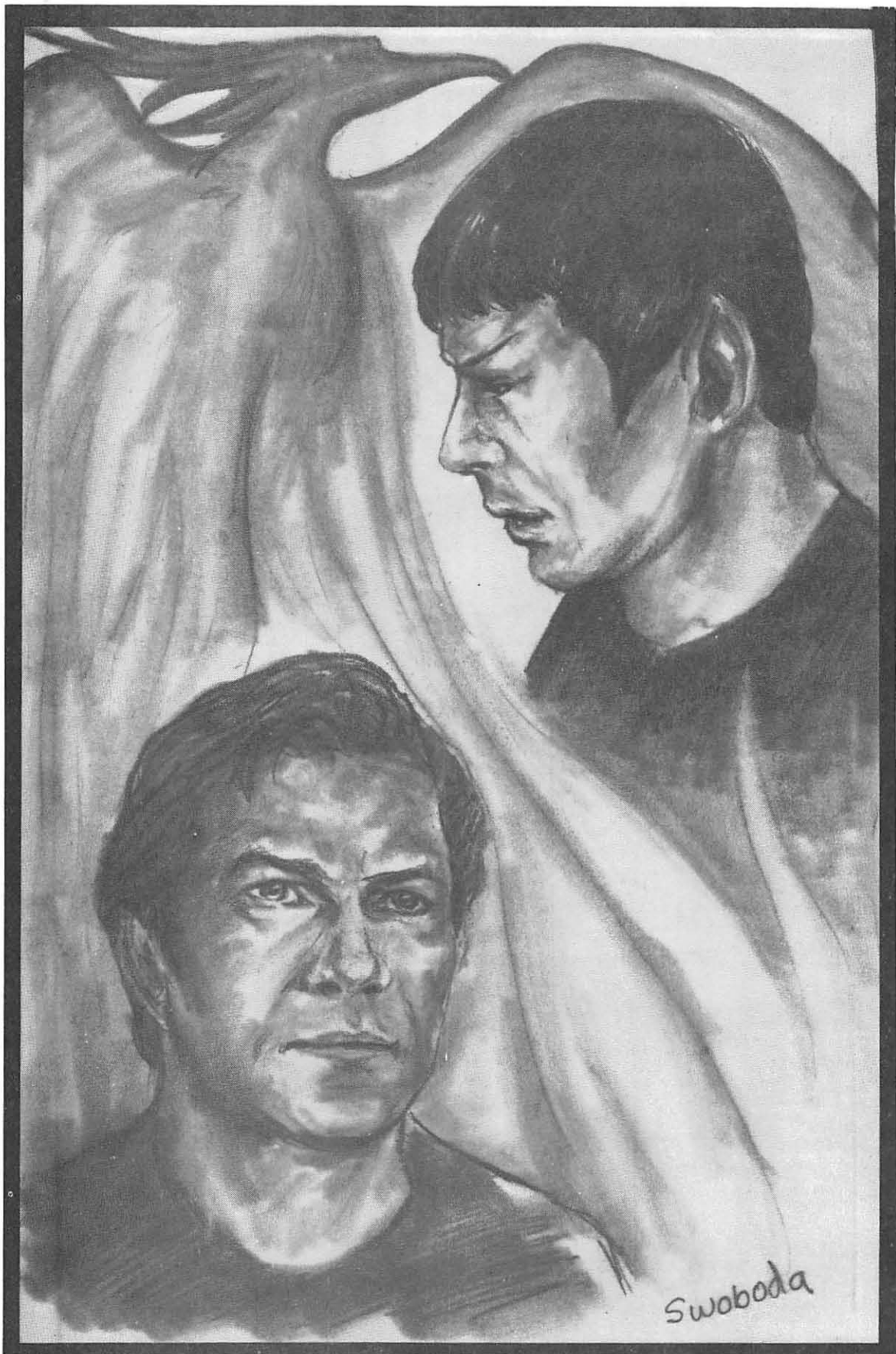
Cold, black, obsidian eyes  
eyes that once spoke volumes  
of un-uttered pain  
eyes that see now  
with uncanny clarity.  
His gaze touches each of us  
briefly yet intently  
and at once we know  
he has forgotten nothing.

Once child of none  
neither Vulcan nor Earth  
he has earned his place  
all of Vulcan is his.  
Awed and humbled we set upon knee  
and speak the words paying homage,

"Spock of Vulcan,  
we come to serve."









# SUNBIRD PT 3

# DAYBREAK

By: Jennifer Weston

Art by: Carole Swoboda

*To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than death of night;  
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;  
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be,  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory.*

from Prometheus Unbound  
by Percy Bysshe Shelley



The Story so far:

'Sunbird Part III' is the final installment of the narrative begun in Trinetten Kern's 'Me and Thee' (Off The Beaten Trek #1), and continued in Mary K. Frey's 'Until That Tomorrow' (OTBT #2) and my own 'Sunbird Parts I and II' (Mind Meld #1). The setting is an alternative universe from that of the ST movies -- one in which Kirk and Spock are both court-martialed before the completion of the Enterprise's five-year mission.

As 'Me and Thee' begins, Kirk is being released from the Federation's Brewster Penitentiary, four years after an accident which killed 283 of his crew and nearly wrecked the Enterprise. Though the collision was in no way his fault, Kirk was convicted of culpable negligence and served four years in prison. Once he gets outside the gates he finds Dr. McCoy, Engineer Scott, and an incognito Spock awaiting him. From them he learns that Spock was given command of the Enterprise after him, but, six months later, was obligated to engage the destruct sequence, after the ship sustained crippling damage in a Klingon-patrolled sector. That action had been necessary for the safety of the crew (who'd beamed to a nearby planet), but a Star Fleet court had decided Spock had needlessly destroyed a starship to avenge James Kirk's disgrace. So Spock, too, was court-martialed, sentenced to exile from Federation space, and barred from his own planet by the ruling Vulcan Council. His father, Sarek, feeling personally dishonored, left Vulcan shortly after for parts unknown, and Amanda, soon succumbed to stress-related heart disease. But Spock made it to the neutral planet Eskar, where he made a marriage-of-necessity to T'Prenn, a Vulcan woman with a similarly tragic past. Over the years he built a profitable import-export company. Spock invites Kirk to come live with him on Eskar, and command one of his ships. Though saddened to leave behind McCoy and Scott, who are still in Star Fleet, Kirk accepts.

In 'Until That Tomorrow', Kirk and Spock reach Eskar. Here Jim meets the very reserved T'Prenn, Spock's adolescent step-daughter, T'Pryr, his three-year-old daughter T'Parin, and his newborn son, James. Later, in a private evening conversation, Spock admits it was not strictly for Kirk's sake that he invited him to live here. Spock's years aboard the Enterprise have brought much of his submerged human self to the surface; he can now acknowledge a personal need for Jim's companionship. This greatly eases Kirk's initial apprehensions about his new environment, yet one discomforting item remains. Kirk can sense some deep-rooted estrangement between Spock and his wife, and is unhappily suspicious that he is the cause.

'Sunbird Parts I and II' opens some weeks later, just after Kirk has returned from his first trip in command of the transport vessel Phoenix. Though he's found the experience deeply satisfying, he confesses to Spock that his conviction for negligence has left him with irrational doubts about his competence to command. Spock responds by bringing out an office memo he'd stolen four years ago, addressed from Admiral Komack to one of Kirk's jurors, and reading "This is our opportunity to eliminate J.K." All Kirk's doubt vanishes under a rush of righteous anger, as he vows to make this injustice known. He gets his first chance some days later when McCoy pays a visit, but Bones has brought an even more infuriating document, provided by Uhura, now posted at Star Fleet Command's Record's Department. It's a communication from Admiral Fitzgerald to a Rigellian Proctor, instructing him to sabotage the Enterprise -- the sabotage which eventually made it necessary

for Spock to destroy the ship. Through his rage, Kirk realizes that two such incidents suggests a wide-spread corruption in Star Fleet. He asks McCoy to try to find someone trustworthy among the upper echelons to help them see justice done. McCoy decides their best candidate is Surgeon General Sigrid Johansson, but gets more than he bargains for when he takes her into his confidence. It turns out that she, working on her own, has been studying the corruption for years. It's called the Rodinium Shield, the leaders are Admirals Komack, Fitzgerald, and Fitzpatrick, and it's larger, better organized, and more ruthless than anyone suspected. Getting it exposed promises to be a gigantic -- and dangerous -- undertaking, for the Shield has hundreds of members, most of them unidentified. But McCoy is certain that every one of his ex-shipmates will fully dedicate themselves to this cause. Sigrid immediately offers to aid them in any way she can. So Scott, Uhura, Sulu, Dr. M'Benga, and a few more of the Enterprise crew -- now scattered among different starships and bases -- are secretly informed of the situation, and requested to find written evidence of the Shield's activities through whatever means they have. With Uhura's expertise as a Records Officer to refer to, they all learn how to burglarize confidential files, and deliver them either to Eskar or the Surgeon General. Sterling and Almarine Driscoll -- fellow Star Fleet exiles now commanding another of Spock's ship-ping vessels -- take care of ferrying people and missives between Federation space and Eskar. Kirk and Spock are obliged to remain where they are to avoid attracting attention, but find enough to battle in preventing bitterness from taking them over. As each of their operatives manages to find a few more people to join the 'Phoenix Conspiracy', it grows, and incriminating documents are secured, but at a discouragingly slow rate. Then a breakthrough: Uhura locates Sarek and sends word to him of what's been happening. Rejuvenated at the prospect of clearing his son's name, Sarek becomes Conspiracy's contact with the Vulcan Council. To Spock he makes a more personal offer; to join in a 'Kaythan-Velm' relationship, making himself Spock's subordinate as penance for abandoning his son in a time of need. For the Conspiracy's sake, Spock accepts. Sarek's first assignment is to determine exactly why the Vulcan Council exiled Spock. He discovers it was due to some very libelous reports sent to the Council by the three Star Fleet Admirals. Uhura and Sigrid manage to provide the Council with evidence that these reports were a Shield 'smear' campaign to get Spock exiled from his home world; whereupon the Council not only offers to reinstate citizenship to Spock and his family, but they clandestinely instruct every Vulcan in the Fleet to join forces with the Conspiracy, finally giving it enough members to make it a truly effective organization. One very important fact Sulu's group discovers that the Shield, in its early days, provoked a war which exterminated the inhabitants of the planet Dessrand. Uhura is notified to seek out the documents to provide it, for revealing this will certainly mean the death of the Shield. Unfortunately, Admiral Komack has already gotten wind of what's going on, and has ordered all his Shield-bearers to watch for any indication of spying -- particularly in Star Fleet Command. Meanwhile, on Eskar, Kirk notices Spock and T'Prenn's relationship has undergone a change for the better. When he asks Spock about it he learns T'Prenn had previously believed Spock was guilty of his alleged offense -- was a despicable 'oath-breaker', but has been convinced otherwise by the Council's message. Kirk has never been the problem, after all. Doubly gratified by this and the Conspiracy's recent progresses, Kirk and Spock dare to make plans for their life after the war is won, but are rudely interrupted by the sudden arrival of Almarine Driscoll with a horrifying message from Sigrid: Uhura has been arrested.



Admiral Komack paced repeatedly across his office, maintaining a measured, heavy stride, his expression grimly detached. Every time he passed Uhura she found herself tensing in her chair, expecting him to whirl on her with another barrage of questions. She tried studying other objects in the room, but found little relief in that.

An over-sized Federation flag hung behind the desk -- a token of Komack's power as Star Fleet Admiral. Other than that the walls were barren of any feature. Even the corners were rounded to avoid casting shadows in the harsh white lighting. Uhura had long since surmised the decor was calculated to unnerve visitors -- Komack was very skilled at that. For instance, this business of repeatedly having her brought up here at 0300, the hour when, as Napoleon had noted, human courage was at its lowest ebb. And, of course, the Admiral's habit of interspersing his questioning with protracted pacing. But Uhura's command training had held firm so far. She had successfully maintained her veneer of calm annoyance, determinedly taking in her experience one moment at a time. Blocking out any consideration of the future was one of the most important aspects of withstanding interrogation, as she was coming to appreciate firsthand.

Without warning, Komack swung on her again. "What were you doing in an unauthorized area?" he barked.

Uhura lifted cold eyes. "I've told you fourteen times already. I misread Commodore Berganza's order sheet as 2017.9, instead of 2019.7. I don't understand what all this..."

"How did you happen to start misreading orders now?"

Uhura drew a deep breath, as though drawing on her patience. "I've done it dozens of times before; when you do nothing but handle files all day you get plenty of opportunities to make mistakes of that sort. No harm's ever been done. I've always corrected myself. I just never had any... watch dogs... around before." Uhura fingered her upper arm tenderly and glared over her shoulder at Commodore Vardakis, a curvacious Amazon with unnaturally smooth chestnut hair, leaning against the left wall. Vardakis' return glare bore an even lower temperature. Komack's frown deepened, not with anger as much as with intense dislike, and he resumed his pacing.

Uhura sighed mentally, wondering for whose benefit she was maintaining this charade. She certainly had no hope of convincing the Admiral she hadn't known exactly what she was doing, and even less of convincing Vardakis. Was it for the stalwart young security guard, standing alertly behind her chair? Probably just as useless. He was almost certainly a Shield-bearer too, fully aware of what was really going on beneath this fabricade of an espionage investigation.

Uhura considered a moment and realized that she was simply trying to waste time. By now, the entire Phoenix conspiracy must have heard about her arrest four days ago, and somebody must be working on a scheme to get her out of here. The only help she could give them was to stall. There really was not anything else to do, since she had no intention of confessing.

Komack halted again and Uhura started involuntarily, immediately angry at herself.

"Do you have any idea what was inside that file?"

Uhura answered with unfeigned irritation. "How could I possibly know that?"

"I fully intend to find out, Ms. Uhura. That, and everything else you know. And I'd advise you to consider that I may already know more about this than you suspect."

Uhura pretended to be amused. "And just what do you imagine you know, Admiral?" It was a dangerous chance, but even now she could not pass up any opportunity to learn something of potential value to the conspiracy.

The Admiral glared at her, and Uhura stiffened, half expecting him to strike her. Instead, he leaned over, so close she had to fight the urge to draw away.

"Whatever I know, I mean to learn everything," he warned, his voice a low hiss. "And to that end, I'm even prepared to send you to the DeBolt Mental Rehabilitation Colony for 'treatment'. Some of their methods are rather primitive... but very effective."

There was absolutely no mistake about what he meant. Uhura would have read it in his eyes if the words had not been sufficient. Tho shaken by this, the one threat she had never expected to encounter within the Federation, she managed to answer disparagingly, "How do you intend to have me committed on the basis of one filing error?"

"Do not underestimate my resources, Ms. Uhura." Komack smiled cruelly. "But I rather think you already know better than that, don't you?" Komack straightened and moved away again, giving her time to think, but Uhura barely noticed. Her mind was a whirl of shock and apprehension, her inner defenses badly jolted by this development.

Could Komack possibly be bluffing? Almost involuntarily, her memory leaped back to those last, terrifying hours at the Roystadt system, to the holocaust which had so nearly happened there. The Admiral had deliberately put over four hundred lives in jeopardy, just to eliminate one possible risk to his career. Compared to that, carrying out this present threat would be practically standard procedure. She should have realized it long before.

Another memory rose -- the one which had haunted Uhura since her arrest. A meeting several months ago, in the Surgeon General's office, when indicators had shown the intercom was closed so they had been able to speak openly about their projects and contingency plans for the conspiracy. Johansson had told her if Uhura was ever in need of a hiding place, she was to come to Sigrid's office. "I can conceal you from any tricorder on this base," she had assured, though she had declined to specify how. Until now,



Uhura had not dared to think of acting on those instructions, frighteningly aware of what the consequences would be if she were recaptured there. If the Shield discovered Sigrid Johansson was a Conspiracy leader...

But now it looked like they were probably going to find out anyway, as well as everything else Uhura knew. Command training had its limits. The only alternative was for her to get to Johansson. Even if they were caught together, Uhura could claim she had fled to the Head of the Medical Section to seek protection against being falsely committed to a mental institution. At the very least, the Surgeon General was not someone the Shield could dispose of without due process, and they might be slowed down long enough for Kirk and Spock to send help. Considering these factors, Uhura subverted her anxiety, and resolved to make a break for the Medical Section the first chance she got.

It took her a half-minute to realize that Komack had stopped beside her again, and was regarding her with smug 'well, what is it to be?' expression. Uhura didn't answer verbally, just let her full contempt for the admiral flow from her eyes, and had the satisfaction of seeing his jaw drop. Obviously he had not been expecting such total rejection.

"Take her back to the brig!" he roared at the guard, waving an equally contemptuous dismissal. As Uhura was led from the room, she was permitted to hear Komack saying: "Now, Commodore Vardakis, about these indications of mental imbalance you've observed in your subordinate over the past few... "

The office door swished shut, leaving Uhura and the guard in almost total silence. At this hour of the morning the corridors were practically deserted. Now would be the perfect time, the Bantu woman thought, but simultaneously realized her plan would be much harder to carry out than to decide upon. Her guard was fully alert. At the first sign of breaking away he would stun her with his phaser. Once back in her cell, Uhura knew, there would be no future opportunity at all to...

The guard nudged her arm. Uhura looked at him, and to her surprise he appeared apologetic.

"I'm sorry about the Admiral's behavior, Lieutenant-Commander. He shouldn't have been so rude to you, not giving you the benefit of any doubt."

Uhura was startled. Had Komack really put her under the charge of a non-Shield-bearer, someone who didn't know what was actually happening? Or was this another deception, perhaps to trick her into saying more than she should? The possibilities flashed through her consciousness in the split-second before she masked her surprise with a reassuring smile.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Ensign. I'm not worried about this business. It will be cleared up as soon as Komack talks with Commodore Berganza."



The guard grinned fractionally, as if in agreement. They proceeded as before, but Uhura was intent on this new possibility. If this man was not a Shield-bearer, then he wouldn't appreciate how desperate her situation was, and would not be on special guard against a possible escape attempt.

Uhura, in contrast, found herself suddenly possessed by an animal-like acuteness of sense, and a computer-like rapidity of calculation. As they turned the next corner, she spotted her chance instantly -- an empty hallway, an unlocked restroom on one side, a slight ripple in the carpeting.

Uhura kept her gaze straight ahead, her pace normal. Everything depended on perfect timing now... Her left toe caught on the ripple and she stumbled.

The security man clicked his tongue with disgust. "Some Maintenance Crew we've got around here." He extended his foot to push the carpet back into place, lowering his stare. Like lightening, the edge of Uhura's hand smashed into the side of his neck, and he fell with a muted thump. Not giving herself any chance to think, Uhura scooped up his phaser and dragged the guard into the restroom where she treated him to a dose of heavy stun. That done, she slipped back into the hall, listened to make sure no one had heard and was coming to investigate, before hiding the phaser under her blouse and starting back up the hallway. Her mind coolly charted the most direct route to the Medical Section, thankful as never before that she had such familiarity with every nook, cranny, and corridor on the base.

At the first intersection, she paused and listened again, crossed, started down the next hall... The sound of an opening door ahead. Uhura ducked into a side passage and flattened herself against the wall as someone started in her direction. She could not afford to let herself be seen clearly on this journey. The whole base was undoubtedly buzzing with news of her arrest. Anyone recognizing her would, at the least, take note of which direction she was going; and at worst, would summon Security. The footsteps came abreast of the side hall, and a very tired-looking yeoman passed, never even glancing up. Uhura waited until the sounds of the other person had receded, then scampered off in the opposite direction.

With having to stop at every crossing to check for sounds of approach -- and even then never feeling absolutely sure that the way was clear -- the journey proved to be the most nerve-wracking one she had ever had to make. Several times voices ahead told her the halls were occupied; forcing her to make detours, always with the fear of finding the alternative route was also blocked. The corridors seemed to stretch on endlessly, even though Uhura went through them as fast as silence would allow. In the back of her mind was the nagging possibility that Johansson might not even be in her office at this hour, but Uhura felt intuitively that Sigrid would never leave the base while she, Uhura, was in trouble.

As she drew nearer her goal, that dread was replaced by another -- sooner or later someone at the detention Block was going to notice the guard was late bringing her back and implement a search, if they had not already. How long had it been? It felt like hours...

A sound behind her: more footsteps. It was too late to get out of sight, and ahead was a long, straight corridor. Uhura inhaled deeply and forced her feet to move at a normal rate. Whoever it was must already have a clear view of her, but, judging from the leisurely pace of the footsteps, had not recognized her. Luckily, there were few people on the base who knew her well enough to identify her from the back. The best thing she could do now was avoid attracting attention, and continue at a casual rate as though she had every business in the world being here. Every muscle in her legs wanted to run -- to dash out of the follower's line of sight. It took inordinate discipline to keep moving slowly.

The steps behind were getting louder. The man had a longer stride than she did.

Uhura took the next turn without stopping, fervently hoping for an empty hallway. The corridor was clear, but the danger behind reminded, for the follower took the same turn. Was he deliberately trailing her? It did not really matter. At the rate he was catching up he would soon be beside her, where he could see her face. She lengthened her own stride slightly. The other footsteps were still getting closer. She could see ahead of her the intersection which would put her within sight of the Medical Section -- only twenty meters away now -- but knew she would not reach it in time. She would have to risk a dash. Her leg muscles were already tensing in preparation, her hand creeping up toward the phaser...

The steps suddenly turned off, fading down a connecting hall. Only then did Uhura realize she had been holding her breath. Releasing it gratefully, she sprinted the remaining distance to the intersection. Finally her goal was in sight at the far end of the left corridor. There was the wide, open doorway, its arch marked with the emblem of a coiled serpent and staff, the ages-old symbol of medicine. Uhura was certain nobody in need of first aid had ever been more relieved to see it. She had taken her first couple steps toward the office when the Base Alarm finally sounded.

"Intruder Alert," a bassano voice blared over the klaxon. "All security personnel report to search posts. Repeat, all security personnel..."

Abandoning silence, Uhura raced for the arch. Already the sound of other runners was pounding down the corridors... on either side... ahead... at her back. Panicked, she darted into another side hall and crouched behind a disposal unit, drawing her phaser. The 'pursuers', two lean security men, had apparently not seen her. They thundered by her hiding place and on toward the end of the hall. Uhura waited until their noises had faded before peering into the corridor again. It was clear, but now they were between her and Johansson, and very shortly would begin a systematic search of the entire base with their tricorders.

Grimly clutching the phaser, Uhura ran across the remaining distance to the caduceus-marked doorway. The reception area would be to the immediate right, and beyond that, the short corridor leading to the Surgeon General's office. If only those guards had taken another turn...

Uhura had intended to pause and listen for them before entering, but she heard the distant sounds of more searchers coming from behind, so, instead, slipped immediately into the reception area, phaser at ready. One of the security men was there -- a tall, broad-shouldered lieutenant -- with his back to her. Uhura froze, holding her breath. No, he had not heard her enter. Beyond him, manning the circular reception desk, was a willowy milk-skinned woman with a fiery red mane -- Johannson's Ursulian aide, Dray.

"... for this disturbance, but I have to scan every room in this section," the guard was saying.

"Ms. Johannson's orders are that she's not to be bothered in any way, Lieutenant. She's in the middle of an important project," Dray answered in her most languid tone. As she spoke, she lifted a long white hand to her hair and entwined it in the crimson strands -- a gesture of secret trust among Ursulians, and one that conveyed to Uhura that she had seen her. Uhura glanced toward the corridor to Johannson's office and realized she would never be able to get to it without passing into the guard's line of sight. She could stun him, but the sound of the phaser would bring every searcher in the area. There was only one hope: that Dray could get the man to turn the other way. Soundlessly, Uhura began sliding along the wall toward the corridor, hoping the Ursulian would surmise her strategy.

"We can't make any exceptions during Intruder Alert. There's an escaped prisoner loose on the base -- you understand that?"

"Have you any reason to believe he's in here?" Dray inquired, leaning her elbow against the left side of the desk. The security man turned obligingly to face her, and Uhura gained a few more unnoticed meters.

"Not specifically, and it doesn't matter. We're doing a systematic search of the entire base, and this sector is my... "

Unexpectedly, Dray half-collapsed, sliding gracefully down onto the desk top -- for an Ursula native, a typical indication of fatigue. "I'm... sorry," she murmured, dragging a hand across large mahogany eyes. "These long working hours... What were you saying?"

The guard, apparently resigning himself to the difficulties of dealing with a tired Ursulian, bent close to her head and spoke each word slowly and distinctly. "I said, this sector has to be searched, and I'm the one assigned to do it, so if you could please notify... "

Uhura crossed the final meter and ducked into the corridor, hastily stowing the phaser as she reached Sigrid's office door. Just in time she remembered not to use the buzzer. Instead she tapped out the prearranged emergency code against the lower edge: one, one-two-three, one. The door slid back immediately, and Uhura darted through like a cat. Johannson was there, standing behind the desk, motioning for Uhura to keep silent and come over. As Uhura obediently hurried to her, Sigrid pulled off one of the panels from the back of her desk, revealing a narrow compartment. Even as she did, the intercom buzzed, "Dray, I said I didn't want to be disturbed," Johannson responded impatiently.

"I know it, General, but there's a Lieutenant from Security out here, who insists he has to scan your office. He promises it won't take long."

"Oh, all right. Send him in," the Surgeon General replied, simultaneously gesturing for Uhura to climb into the compartment. But as Uhura bent over to comply, a flash of panic crossed Sigrid's face. One hand snaked out and snatched away Uhura's phaser, the other pushed the younger woman into the narrow space. Uhura barely had time to draw her legs in against her chest before the panel closed again, leaving her in warm, humming darkness, with some rounded protrusion digging uncomfortably into her left shoulder. Seconds later, as though from a distance, she heard the swish of the office door opening, and then the guard's voice again, muffled but perfectly articulate.

"Sorry to bother you, Ms. Johannson, but I'm to give this room a quick search."

Sigrid's voice, right above Uhura's head. "If this is another one of Fitzgerald's surprise inspections, you can tell him for me that he's... "

"Nothing like that. We've had an escape from the Detention Block, within the hour. You know scanning is S.O.P."

"Lieutenant, I've been here since 800 hours and I can unconditionally guarantee; no criminal has entered this office up to this moment." Grim as the situation was, Uhura could not help smiling at Johannson's choice of words.

"I have to scan anyway, General. And the sooner you let me start, the sooner I'll be gone."

"Do so, then."

Uhura's eyes widened incredulously, for she had been sure Sigrid would come up with some excuse to prevent the room from being searched. As the shrill whine of a tricorder sounded, the unbidden thought leaped into her mind: She's been on their side all along! She'll betray us all!

The mechanical whirring grew louder as the tricorder was panned in a circle, reached its crescendo, as it was aimed at the desk... then, unbelievably, died down again and stopped.

"Thank you for your cooperation, General. We won't be disturbing you any further."

"Good night, Lieutenant." There was another swish as the door closed, then: "Dray, do you think you can make certain nobody else comes in here tonight?"



"I'll do my best, Ms. Johansson," came Dray's slightly filtered voice.

"That will probably be more than sufficient, thank you. Johansson out." Uhura heard Sigrid flicking a few extra switches as she signed off, no doubt seeing to it that no one could listen in. Then there was the sound of rustling cloth as she knelt beside the compartment and spoke through the panel.

"I mounted a Clems device in there three months ago. It's that disk sticking out of the wall. Feel it?"

That explained the lump against her shoulder. "Is that what it is?!"

"Yes. Unhook it and tuck it into your cleavage. It's powered by the radiation field generated by your metabolic processes, so you mustn't lose contact with it for even a second."

Uhura followed the instructions, marveling at the small size of the device. Like everyone at Star Fleet Command, she had heard rumors about the Clems Project -- an effort to develop a portable unit capable of masking a humanoid body from any known sensor -- but had had no idea one had actually been completed. "It's in place."

The compartment opened and Uhura carefully unfolded herself. "That Clems will keep you hidden as long as your metabolism is functioning; in other words, as long as you're alive," Johansson explained, helping her to her feet. "But while you're wearing it, be very careful not to touch anything containing a transtater, or the power-gathering system in the Clems will overload and explode. That's why I took your phaser. Sorry if that gave you a bad moment."

"I'm okay now." Uhura smiled as she straightened her clothing. The instant of doubt past; her trust in Johansson was as unmitigated as before. "Thanks for getting me out of that."

"You're not off the base yet," Sigrid cautioned. She planted hands on hips and frowned at the door, thinking out loud. "I've already sent for the Intrepid II -- that is, I insisted they bring Dr. T'Tarn here to assist with the first tests on the Royventis vaccine. But they won't be in port for two days, and it won't be safe for you here in the meantime. Sooner or later, Security's bound to start a visual search."

For a minute both women were quiet, glancing around the room for some kind of inspiration. Uhura's eyes strayed to the transporter box floating idly in the corner, and stopped there. Sigrid followed her gaze, and the two of them regarded the container speculatively.

"Uhura, are you very good at fitting into small spaces?" Johansson inquired conversationally.

"I fit into that compartment under your desk, didn't I?"

The older woman laughed. "Good answer. Well, then, I believe I may be able to work something out... quite literally."



Transporter Chief Skeal drummed his fingertips against the console, now in four-four time, now two-two, now in some other variation. Pointless, but it did give him something to concentrate on. Skeal, a full-blooded Jensahnian, was a retiring sort, who found nothing agreeable in knowing there was a dangerous fugitive loose on the Base. The stocky red-shirt posted beside the transporter platform provided a constant reminder. Skeal had already made several attempts to strike up a conversation with him, but had received only curt replies. Apparently the human guard resented being stationed here while his fellows enjoyed the more immediate excitement of searching the building. Skeal, by contrast, was glad to be out of it. Fires of the Plaraids! It was bad enough being on this shift with some criminal running around, almost certainly searching for a way out of the...

Sounds emerged from the hall -- someone approaching the transporter room. The guard rushed toward the doorside, phaser drawn, as the umber-skinned Skeal swung agilely to the far side of the console. A petite woman in a medical uniform came into view, and Skeal relaxed. "It's only the Surgeon General."

"Good evening... or rather, good morning, Skeal, Lieutenant," Johansson greeted as she entered. The disappointed guard returned to his station.

"Morning, Ms. Johansson." Skeal let his crest drop -- the equivalent of a grin -- when he saw the familiar anti-grav box she was towing. It always gave him the impression she was leading some short, square robot by the hand. "Another big load tonight?"

"Another. More Royventis literature."

"I thought you were through with that weeks ago."

"So did I." Sigrid sighed, flashing a martyr's expression.

Skeal turned his head to eye the packed rows of paper and plasticine sticking up from the top of the box. It was at least the twelfth such load he had seen. "Quite a lot to be written about a single illness, isn't it?"

"Not considering the chemical complexity of the disease," Johansson replied in the earnest tone of a researcher warming up to a favorite subject. "For example, one form involves the Royventis bacillus invading the reticular cells and inhibiting the formation of cytoplasm sheaths around the small lymphocytes, thus causing the antibodies to prematurely..."

Skeal interrupted, not at all anxious to learn the entire biology of Royventis. "General, tho I might like to talk, I should point out we're still on Intruder Alert." He jerked his sagittal crest toward the glowering guard.

"Oh. Sorry, forgot." She suddenly looked apprehensive. "Haven't they caught that escapee yet?"

The security guard spoke up. "We will. Rear-Admiral Lynd's already got a dragnet in place to stop anyone leaving this base without permission. And the beam-scrambler's activated to freeze any unauthorized attempt to transport anything out. We'll get her."

"Her'? Nobody told me it was a woman."

"Sure is. It's that espionage agent they caught in the Record's Department four days ago, Lt. Commander Uhura."

"That one!" Johannson shook her head incredulously. "I still can't believe it of her. She used to bring my files all the time. She didn't look the type at all."

The guard snorted derisively, murmured "Just like a woman." Skeal smiled tolerantly, and advised, "You should remember what your Shakespeare said about that: 'There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face.'"

"I suppose that's true," Sigrid agreed, with a trace of her ironic smile which neither man recognized for what it was.

Skeal offered reassurance. "In any event, there's no need for you to fret about it, Ms. Johannson. Go home and get some rest. Even you must need it by now; you've been here since this time yesterday morning."

"I wish I could, but first I've got to visit the Medical Dispensary and look over the first arrived shipment of vaccine. I swear, developing new medicines has got to be this galaxy's most unhealthy profession! Beam me down to the flyer Lot."

Skeal's stout claws snapped the familiar coordinates into place. Sigrid had just started for the platform when the guard stepped into her path, tricorder extended. "I'll have to scan that box before you put it on the transporter. Security orders."

"Of course." Johannson stood calmly during the inspection. The guard ran the tricorder just long enough to confirm the box contained nothing but paper products, then waved her onto the platform. Johannson pushed the box on ahead of her, all the way to the back, then stepped on to the unit just in front of it. "Energize."

She watched Skeal pull back on the switches. A moment later she and the box were in a glass-sided cubical in the center of an immense, hard-floored chamber lined with rows of various air-vehicles. Swiftly, she whipped her ID card from her tunic belt and pushed it into the slot at the corner of the cubical, whereupon one crystal wall slid aside and she pushed the box, and herself, out. A fast glance around assured her that, at this hour of the morning, no one was here to witness her peculiar behavior. For several tense seconds she waited, but no mechanical hum sounded, nor any other indication that anybody was trying to reverse the transporter process or follow her. Much relieved, she towed the box toward the slot where her own flyer was parked. It was easy to locate. Hers was the only craft on the floor that was solid ivory, with long, tapering fins like an angelfish, and a

single caduceus-emblazoned door with a touch-plate. As Sigrid extended her palm to the plate, she fixed her gaze on the door's lower edge. Yesterday morning she had placed a small sulfur gas capsule in the door well, in such a position that the next opening of the door would be sure to rupture it. As the door slid back, a tiny cloud of yellow powder burst from the well, and dissipated instantly, too small and brief to notice unless one were watching for it. It was as clear an indication as she needed that no one had tampered with the interior of this flyer since it had been parked.

Johannson positioned the anti-grav box into the square compartment beside the driver's seat before climbing in herself. The flyer emitted a purring hum and lifted gently from the floor as she activated the engines and drove to the huge entrance at the far end of the lot. Here, to get the big doors to swing open, she was obliged to stop, and once more insert her card into a mechanism protruding from the wall. As Sigrid rolled down her side window, she noted the faint glow of sensor bulbs lining the doorway, activated now, as was mandatory during an Intruder Alert. But those, too, would pose no problem. The only really dangerous moment had been the first one after the transporter had been activated. Apparently, positioning herself in front of the box had been sufficient to disarm that threat. Of course, Johannson considered, it was possible Skeal and/or the guard had seen something, but had let her go because the Rodinium Shield already had some plot to follow her, hoping to be led to other members of the Conspiracy. There was even possibility that they had engineered this entire escape, to learn from Uhura what she would never have told them voluntarily.

Possible, but Sigrid didn't believe it for a moment.

Such fears had been with her constantly through the first few years of her private investigation of the Rodinium Shield -- that her antagonists were aware of what she was up to, and were letting her believe herself undiscovered so they could lure her into some trap. In time, though, she had come to doubt them capable of such subtlety. Everything she had learned about them indicated the Shield's working philosophy was: The moment you find something in your way, beat it down.

The bay doors finally parted and Johannson drove out, bearing to the right, away from the paved glide-ways and towering structures of the Base Compounds. Within minutes, she had left them behind, and was skimming over the rugged, natural landscapes of the unsettled areas, glowing indigo under the first light of dawn. The Medical Dispensary was about an hour's flight in this direction, and was actually as much an experimental laboratory as a dispensary. Since its subjects of study frequently included pathogenic organisms, it had been built over two hundred kilometers from the settlements, a safety precaution. Sigrid had been grateful for that circumstance many times before this, for she always enjoyed the flight there. Wilderness, where primal life-and-death dramas were being conducted with deadly sincerity, was purely refreshing after a day among all the petty back-biting that went on at Star Fleet Command.

The Surgeon General centered the dispensary on her directional controls and switched them to automatic. That done, she reached into the transport box and pulled back a stack of folders. "You can straighten up a little now." The remaining stacks started to shift of their own accord, and

Uhura's head emerged, hair disarranged, eyes squinting against the dim light. "Better not come all the way out, though. Just in case someone else comes along, there'd better be only one person visible in this flyer."

"Acknowledged." The papers moved again as Uhura tried to find a comfortable position. "I think there's a thesis on the formation of cytoplasmic sheaths poking me in the back."

"Better that than Rear-Admiral Lynd's phaser, believe me."

"I didn't mean to sound... "

"I know." Sigrid went on hurriedly, to forestall any amenities. "I've sent Dray ahead to fix up a corner of the dispensary for you, so you'll be comfortable until the Intrepid II gets here. To guard against visual search, we'll put up Restricted Area markers, warning that there's active Royventis cultures in the vicinity. There'll be no reason for doubt; it's well known I'm about to start testing the new vaccine there. Even the most by-the-book security personnel will want to keep their distance, since it's even more well known that a bout of Royventis is a nasty experience."

"I know. I had a mild case once. Eight days in traction."

"That's an asset -- you'll have some resistance to the cultures. What you'll have to be careful about is avoiding contact with any of the machinery, because of the Clems. And, whatever you do, don't ever remove it."

Uhura worked a finger through the stacks to touch the little metal disk fastened securely against her chest, reminding herself again it represented her safety from the Rodinium Shield. Now she better appreciated why the Clems project had been kept under such tight security. "'How'd you ever get hold of it, anyway?"

"It wasn't too difficult. The Medical Department is deeply involved in the Clems development, for the project is based on in-depth knowledge of humanoid metabolisms. So, I have access to the building materials. Dray and I put that one together from components of some discarded experimental models. I rearranged some records to make certain no one missed them."

"Then nobody else is aware one has been successfully completed?"

"Oh, we can make them now. We just haven't got the overload problem solved. The transtater, you know, is the unit which makes it possible for all standard Fleet equipment to pack a lot of power into small spaces -- more energy than a Clems can handle, since it's designed to make optimum use of very trace amounts. A person wearing a Clems can't use a phaser, communicator or tricorder -- not the ideal circumstance under which to make planet-fall, or conduct any other standard mission. So, we're still working on it. In the meantime, that one should serve well enough until you're safely aboard the Intrepid."

"And after that?"

Johannson glanced at her meaningfully. "That's up to you. I would recommend that you pick someplace, as far out of Star Fleet's jurisdiction as you can manage, and make arrangements to settle there for a long time. But that decision has to be yours."

Uhura had to admit that, amidst all these frantic escape efforts, she hadn't planned that far ahead. Her lips pursed as she considered her alternatives. Remaining aboard the Intrepid II for the duration did not appeal to her. There was too much risk, should some official come aboard unexpectedly. If she were to go to Vulcan, the Council would undoubtedly give her asylum, but that was still inside the Federation. She's be obliged to stay in seclusion, which meant that she wouldn't be of much use the the Phoenix Conspiracy. Of course, she realized that, as the only known enemy of the Rodinium Shield, her days of spying for the resistance were over, but felt more motivated than ever to help in any way possible. So, there was only one place in the galaxy where she could hide from the Shield and still might be able to aid the conspiracy.

"Eskar," she announced. "I'll go to Eskar."

Johannson nodded. "I was hoping you'd decide on that. You'll be safe there as any place, and among friends. 'Course, you and the Intrepid's command will have to be careful that you aren't followed there, or the Shield could arrest Kirk and Spock simply for harboring a fugitive. Better be prepared to stay aboard ship for a while, until they can find a logical excuse for detouring near that sector."

"I'm more worried about getting aboard in the first place," Uhura confessed. "I overheard that guard say all unauthorized transporter activity is being jammed, and even the authorized shipments are bound to be searched first. How am I going to...?"

The Surgeon General spoke as though chiding a subordinate for overlooking the obvious. "Ms. Uhura, I remind you that the Intrepid is crewed entirely by Vulcans. I hardly believe I need acquaint you with their level of innovation, since you served under one for over four years -- Spock-son-of-Sarek, to be exact. Do you really believe there's going to be any serious difficulty?"

Uhura smiled sheepishly. "I guess I wasn't thinking."

"Then, to quote Skeal, don't fret about it. Nor about anything you're leaving behind; I'll take care of it. You've already done more than your share. You are going home."

"Home," Uhura murmured. She hadn't thought of it that way before, but it fit. She was going where she belonged -- with James T. Kirk and Spock, her friends and confidants through the finest years of her life. She noticed Johannson smiling, and experienced a twinge of regret. "I'm going to miss you, Sigrid."



"It'll be a mutual feeling, but don't fret about that, either. This fight against the Shield can't go on forever. Tell Kirk Dray and I will carry on your function as best we can. We'll either finish it, or, perhaps we'll have to escape to Eskar, too, some day. One way or the other, you and I will probably see each other again."

Brave words, Sigrid. You know as well as I, how uncertain our future is. Yet Uhura did find some comfort in the senior woman's matter-of-fact optimism.

The ex-Records Officer leaned back into the papers to contemplate the racing horizon. It was another thirty minutes to the dispensary and at least a two day wait until the Intrepid II arrived. She would then have to get off the base and to Eskar, and even after that, there was still the war to be won. But somehow, despite all the perceived dangers ahead, Uhura felt strangely peaceful. The prospect of rejoining her Captains was filling her with the first real happiness she had known in over five years.



Through the largest part of the outward journey, Kirk and Commander Driscoll, seated at either end of the shuttlecraft's control panel, were uncommunicative. Almarine was intent on her navigation, and Kirk was regarding the streaming stars, trying to get used to how small they appeared. Every time he came home from a mission he found himself overwhelmed, all over again, by how enormous the stars looked through Eskar's magnifying atmosphere, and every time he returned to space, they seemed to have shrunk once more.

On this occasion, he knew one of those bright dots really was less than stellar-size. The U.S.S. Intrepid II was bringing one of his old shipmates back to him -- one less to worry about through sleepless nights. A genuine relief, though it could scarcely be as overwhelming as when word of Uhura's escape reached Eskar. That, after five horrendously anxious days of trying to throw together a workable rescue plan -- he didn't even like to remember. Now, three weeks later, Uhura was finally out of the Rodinium Shields' reach. She was coming back to him.

"You certainly look happy about something."

"Hmmm?" Jim hadn't realized his thoughts were on his face. "Oh. I was just anticipating how nice it will be to see Uhura again."

Driscoll tilted her head. "You were very close?"

Kirk had to think about that for a moment. "No, not 'close' in the usual meaning of the word... not on a personal level. I guess the reason I'm looking forward to seeing her again is, she's a part from my earlier... from when I was James T. Kirk -- Starship Captain. No other phase of my life compares with it."

Alma nodded. "I can empathize."

And, Jim considered, it was quite possible she could. He knew the Driscolls had commanded a Star Fleet Scout vessel before Almarine's court-martial, although he had never learned any details. Though he'd always intended to become better acquainted with the Driscolls, the very nature of their association had always made casual socializing difficult. This might be as good a time as any to fill that gap.

"Are you and your husband planning to reenter the service, when this is over?"

Driscoll answered amicably. "We can't really decide this far in advance, but it's probable we will. I know it's what Sterling wants. He, and I, left a lot of good friends behind." Her expression became distant for a few seconds and Kirk guessed that the faces and names of those friends were flowing across her mind's eye. The same thing happened to him whenever he thought back to his own days in Star Fleet.

"There are still plenty of decent people in the Service, Jim. They're not all like those..." Quite a different expression -- almost hate -- darted across the oval face. Again, Kirk recognized it as a mirror image of the emotion he suppressed in himself. He edged his chair a little closer.

"Was the Rodinium Shield responsible for your courtmartial, too, Alma?"

The pilot nodded. "Yes. Though at the time, I didn't know what it was. I just knew there were some people in the upper echelons with a very bad set of values."

Driscoll regarded Kirk thoughtfully, trying to decide if this was someone to whom she wished to relate that story. Although curious, past experience made Kirk caution her: "Don't tell me anything you'll regret later."

That statement helped make her decision. "That's all right. Enough time has passed. I think I'm ready to let somebody know." Almarine turned her face toward the starfield and kept it averted throughout her narrative.

"It happened a little over five years ago. Our ship, the Diana, was instructed to make a cultural survey of Sigma 404. We followed standard procedure: long- and short-range scans, landing parties of cultural observers; the usual. At first, it seemed a typical example of a developing civilization, with no more than the normal number of political dissidents or civil discontent. But when we'd been there for only two weeks, a political revolt broke out over most of the planet with almost no warning at all. Even though the established government put it down in a hurry, it did a lot of damage, both physical and social. Last I heard, the Sigmanians were still picking up the pieces.

"Shortly after relaying our report of these events to Fleet Headquarters, Sterling, myself, and our senior officers were summoned before an Official Board of Inquiry, to determine whether we'd done anything to provoke the uprising. There was no proof we had: unfortunately, there

couldn't be any proof we hadn't. It was a very suspicious coincidence, and there were a few bits of circumstantial evidence. Notably, that our political surveyors had given special attention to Sigma's disaffected political minorities. So, the issue eventually went to trial.

"But, in the meantime, I'd noticed something peculiar about the attitudes of the Board members. I had been the one directing the survey operations -- leading the landing parties, and so forth -- and, as such, I should have been treated as the primary suspect. Instead, the investigators were virtually ignoring me, and aiming all their fiercest accusations at Sterling. Exactly as though they'd been waiting a long time to get Sterling at a disadvantage, and were using the opportunity to the hilt. Which was precisely the case, as I learned the day before the trial.

"I had a visit in my private cell then, from one of the investigators -- a Commander Rowean Vardakis. She explained that she was acting as the emissary of 'certain highly placed individuals' in Star Fleet, for whom the discharge of Captain Driscoll would be 'a great convenience.' Since I was obviously in a position to benefit from outside help, my career being in jeopardy, she had come to invite me to make it my convenience, too. I was, she assured, considered no threat to the people she represented. Her words were to the effect of: 'You're just small change; it's Captain Driscoll we want to muster out.' And so, the offer was this: if I implicated Sterling as the guilty one at the trial -- not even directly, just by dropping a sufficient number of hints -- these 'highly placed individuals' would see to it that I'd escape prosecution, and would give me the next captaincy of the Diana." Almarine's expression registered total abhorrence. "I couldn't believe the tone she used, as though she considered it a purely reasonable offer... as if it were normal to value a career over any other loyalty."

"Indications are, that's how the Rodinium Shield looks at it," Kirk remarked dryly.

"Apparently. Anyway, I told her I'd think about it, which was true. I wanted to think about how to avoid giving those 'individuals' any cooperation whatsoever. I ended up lying awake all night. 'First thing I realized was, I couldn't tell anybody that a respected official had barged into my cell and offered me a captaincy in exchange for testimony against my husband. It'd be dismissed as the hysterical ravings of a stress-unbalanced woman, at the very least. Whatever I was going to do, I'd have to do it alone. So, I finally decided that if it was Sterling they wanted the most, then it was Sterling they would not get.

"The next morning, I took the stand and, citing Regulations, and entries from the Diana's log which named me as the officer in charge of the survey, claimed 'full and unique responsibility' for whatever violation of the Prime Directive had been committed at Sigma 404."

Commander Driscoll sighed ruefully at the memory. "I suppose it was immature of me, electing myself a martyr that way, but I felt such a desire to show somebody somewhere what I thought of their priorities! They got what they wanted anyway. They still couldn't prove any deliberate violation, so I didn't go to a penitentiary, but I was relieved of my commission and hit with a fine that wiped out everything Sterling and I had. Sterling voluntarily

resigned from the Service, claiming he didn't care to continue with a substitute first officer. Though, I've always suspected he just wanted to prove he could be every bit as loyal, and imprudent, as I could."

Kirk, who had often been accused of such tendencies himself, wasn't about to rebuke her for it; what he felt uncomfortable about was the idea that he, alone, shared Almarine's long-kept secret. "Did you ever tell Sterling about that 'offer'?"

Alma shrugged. "He knew. I don't know how; whether they'd approached him, too, or he just figured it out. But, after the sentencing, as he was helping me out of the stand, he looked at me..." She faltered, groping for the right words, then shook her head as she realized she'd never be able to describe that expression "... and he said: 'Who put you up to it?' I said, 'Vardakis, and whoever she was working for.' We've never discussed it since," Driscoll concluded solemnly, her tone suggesting she'd rather Kirk never bring it up again, either.

No need for a reply. Kirk turned his chair to the front again, thinking. So, the Driscolls had also been victimized by the Rodinium Shield. That did much to explain why Spock had immediately thought of taking them into his confidence, way back when the Conspiracy was first being put together. Now Kirk realized there was an even more important reason. From Almarine's story he had gotten a glimpse of what kind of bond held her and Sterling together: one that both reinforced and transcended the marital ties -- the very same sort of loyalty he and Spock felt for each other, with all the same mutual respect, trust, and deep caring. He also understood why Sterling and Alma, unlike himself and the Vulcan, could contemplate returning to Star Fleet. The Shield hierarchy had not committed the worst possible wrong against those two; it had never separated them.

Kirk's chain of thought ended as Alma suddenly bent over the scanner. "Large moving mass ahead, altering course to intercept us. Starship configuration."

"The Intrepid?"

"Probably. Though if it is, she's ahead of schedule." Driscoll slowed their forward speed with one hand, while the other gripped the Emergency Reverse control just in case they had to run. A vague white blip appeared through the view port, slowly grew, and solidified into a shape as heart-rending as it was unmistakable. As the great vessel cut its own speed, an orange light flashed on the shuttle's console. They were being hailed. Jim and Alma cut eyes, then Kirk reached across and opened the channel.

"Captain Selif of the U.S.S. Intrepid II to shuttlecraft. Request identification," came a resonant male voice with slight Vulcan accent.

The two humans calmed again. Kirk opened the transmission channel and gave the conspiracy's code word. "Shuttlecraft to Intrepid. Phoenix."

"Stand by to receive passenger," Selif instructed in the same matter-of-fact tone. Almarine double-checked to be sure her craft was within transporter range before bringing it to a full stop. "Standing by, steady for Transporter beam, Intrepid," she announced as Kirk turned toward the cleared space in the center of the cargo hold.

A familiar hum accompanied the shimmering column which appeared in the middle of the shuttle, then took shape, became flesh...

Kirk stood, hardly aware of his action. His entire being was focused on that well-remembered face, now breaking into a radiant smile.

"Uhura."

He never knew which of them crossed the remaining distance, only that suddenly they were in each other's arms, laughing, whirling around, maybe shedding a few tears.

"Oh, Captain!"

"Uhura! I've missed you so much!"

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her back just far enough to have a good look at her face. Although part of his mind cautioned that he was hardly in any state to judge objectively, in every way that mattered Uhura looked the same as six years ago, made only more beautiful by the passage of time, and more vividly alive now than he had ever seen it. He clasped her to him again, rocking her gently from side to side, so lost in the joy of the moment that it took him several seconds to really see Almarine, still seated at the console, watching them with vicarious pleasure.

Remembering his manners, Kirk extracted himself from Uhura's embrace and turned her toward the Commander. "Uhura, I'd like you to meet Almarine Driscoll, fellow conspirator and the best damned shuttle pilot I've ever worked with. Alma, I believe you already know my former Communications Officer... by reputation, anyway."

"The whole Conspiracy does," Driscoll replied, rising. The women exchanged a handshake and a few expressions of mutual admiration, but it was evident Uhura's attention was still primarily on Jim Kirk, so Alma was careful not to prolong the greetings. When Uhura turned back to Jim he took her hands, and for a long moment they simply stared, drinking in each other's presence.

"You look wonderful, Captain."

Uhura was probably in no better frame of mind to be objective than he was, Kirk knew, but he beamed anyway. "I'm not your captain anymore, Uhura. Call me Jim."

"All right Cap... I mean, Jim." Uhura smiled at her mistake. "But don't be surprised if it takes me a while to get used to it."

"I won't. Spock still hasn't gotten out of the habit, and if he..."

"How is Spock?" Uhura was obviously just as eager to see her other former captain.

"The same as ever. He's got a wife and three kids now. You heard about that?"

"Of course! I'm really looking forward to meeting them."

"You have only a few hours left to wait."

Alma straightened from the communications unit. "Jim, the Intrepid's still standing by. They want to know if you have any messages to pass on to the Conspiracy."

"Ask them to hold a few more minutes. Any problems on the journey here, Uhura?"

"None. It was quite ordinary, except the embarking. I came aboard the Intrepid II inside of an active anti-matter pod." She laughed aloud at Kirk's horrified expression. "It's a little late to be worrying about that now, Captain. Commander T'Mang made certain the shielding was adequate. Besides, we did need to use something that wouldn't be subjected to visual search."

"Visual! I would have been more worried about sensors! It's a miracle nobody picked you up on..."

"Not a miracle. Engineering." Uhura reached into a belt pouch and extracted a silvery disk, ten centimeters in diameter, which he handed to Kirk. "This is a Clems Device -- deactivated, right now. When it's on, it can hide a living organism from any kind of sensor or scanner. If we could figure out how to manufacture these for the Conspiracy it would solve a lot of our problems."

Kirk turned the innocuous-looking unit over in his palms, thinking how it would fascinate a certain Vulcan. "I'll give it to Spock. He should be able to figure out how it works... or, if he can't, T'Prenn can."

"T'Prenn?"

"Spock's wife, and a blasted good technician in her own right. You didn't know her name?"

Uhura looked a trifle anxious. "Jim, you'd better give me a rapid summary of the home situation before we get to Eskar. I don't want to insult anyone."

"You'll do fine, Uhura. You must have learned some Vulcan etiquette aboard the Intrepid II."

"Hardly. They all practically deferred to me, as though I were some legendary heroine or something."



Kirk was amused. "That's how the Phoenix Conspiracy views you, I'm afraid. You know you've gathered more information for us than anyone else."

"But I didn't get the Dessrand file! I was so close, too. Just a couple more minutes and I'd have... "

"You mean it's actually in there?!" Kirk broke in.

"I'm sure of it, Captain. That was what I was going after when Vardakis pounced on me." Behind her, Almarine stiffened at the sound of that name. "Tho I didn't actually see it, there's a lot of extra guard-circuits on something under that file-date. And from the way they acted afterwards, I knew the Shield was plenty shaken that I'd almost gotten to it. Komack even threatened to have me tortured unless I... "

"He WHAT?!"

Uhura flinched, and Kirk, swallowing his shock and outrage, forced his voice into a lower volume. "What kind of torture?"

"He didn't specify. He didn't even use the word torture, but I don't think I misinterpreted his meaning. That was why I had to take so many chances getting out of Star Fleet Command, Captain... Jim. I couldn't risk them finding out everything I knew."

Kirk wasn't listening. His face a stone mask, he stalked back to the viewing port and glared out in the general direction of Federation space. Alma gave the communications officer a puzzled look, but Uhura, who had known Kirk longer, knew exactly what was happening. He was castigating himself mercilessly; for failing to read the signs which would have warned him the Shield was capable of even this, for allowing his friends to put themselves in such danger, and for ever asking anyone else to take all the risks while he remained the safe and sound beneficiary, like some sybaritic despot who conducted wars for personal amusement.

Well, not anymore.

With a single stiff, military movement, Kirk swung on Almarine. "Commander Driscoll, relay this message to the Intrepid II," he ordered through drawn lips. "All members of the Phoenix Conspiracy are to cease all covert activities immediately; expect no counter orders in the future. The Intrepid is to return to this rendezvous point in four solar weeks, prepared to smuggle one... " Better include Spock in that plan; you know there's no way he's going to let you do it alone, an inner voice warned. "... or possibly two, individuals into Star Fleet Command." Beside him, Uhura let out a startled gasp. "Tell them to inform the Surgeon General to make any preparations possible, short of endangering herself, to facilitate this invasion. Transmit."

"Yes sir." Almarine obediently bent to the task, and Kirk turned to confront a flabbergasted Uhura.

"Captain, you're not thinking of going after that file yourself!"

"I have to. We need it."

"That's suicide! It was risky enough for me to steal anything, and I at least had the clearance and expertise of a Record's Officer! For you to try it would be..."

The captain's tone was as sharp and unyielding as a trititanium blade. "I am not sending anybody else after it. I never would have let you try, if I'd known the stakes. Now that I do know, I've got no excuse to put anyone in that kind of danger except myself. In all probability I'll have to take Spock with me, simply because there's no way I'll be able to stop him, and because, we'll have a better chance of success working together. But no one else is going to be endangered for us."

Uhura, being well acquainted with Kirk's stubborn, often foolhardy, heroic streak, knew better than to try to argue prudence into him. Instead, she tried logical dissuasion. "I very much doubt that file is still in place, Jim. Now that the Shield knows that we know about Dessrand, they've surely destroyed the evidence. You'd be putting your life on the line for nothing."

"I don't think so, Uhura. I've given a lot of thought to this matter: why would they let such a dangerous document continue to exist? And I think I've figured it out -- it keeps potential defectors in line. A lot of the original Shield-bearers must have become disillusioned with the organization after Dessrand -- the idealists and the essentially decent people -- but they won't dare do anything against the Shield, because they know if that file is made public, it's going to mean rehab and correctional facilities for all of them. And the active members don't dare keep it anywhere except in the Command Base Records Department, because, if any one of them took it into his personal keeping, he'd have the advantage over the others. He could alter it to make it look like he was the only one not at fault, and use it as a blackmail weapon to take over control of the Shield. As long as it's in those files, it's a knife at everybody's throat, and my theory is that they're afraid enough of each other to leave it there, even at the risk of it being stolen by an outside agent."

"But if you're wrong?"

Kirk shrugged. "And if I'm wrong, this still won't be much crazier than a hundred other things we've all done for the Conspiracy." Then, in a softer voice: "It's not that I don't appreciate your concern, Uhura, but from this point on, desperate ventures are going to be unavoidable. We can be certain the Rodinium Shield now knows our intentions, and will be taking more ruthless measures than ever to prevent further thefts. Under these circumstances, the conspiracy can't afford any more investigative spying. We have to concentrate on really hurting them -- fast -- and I don't know of any surer way to accomplish that than by securing the Dessrand file. If it's everything we think it is, getting it could mean the termination of this war."

Uhura acknowledged her defeat with a shake of her head. "The years haven't altered you one iota, Captain Kirk."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Message to the Intrepid completed, Jim. Was there anything you wanted to add?"

"No, Alma. Just tell them, 'Thanks', and 'See You in Four Weeks.'" The three of them watched soberly as the great vessel pivoted and plunged back into the deep void. Shortly after, their shuttle did the same thing, in the opposite direction.

Kirk returned his attention to Uhura. "We've got some food aboard. Coffee and sessnhat -- that's a sort of vegetable-and-nut rolled casserole. T'Prenn's recipe. Like to try it?"

"Yes, thank you." At his gesture, Uhura took the seat Jim vacated, and he moved to the aft compartment. In an effort to put her new acquaintance at ease, Almarine offered to answer any questions she might have about Eskar. By the time Kirk returned with their repast, the two women were chatting amiably about Lindolan, T'Prenn, Spock's children, the transport fleet and Sterling. Signaling them not to mind him, Jim made his delivery and retired to one of the seats at the back of the shuttle. Tho they continued their conversation through the rest of the trip, Uhura and Alma were ever aware of him, sitting stiffly, often fidgeting as his mind worked on plans for this venture. His face, however, showed nothing but a grim new sense of purpose.



Slanting sunrays, denoting early afternoon, streamed through the window of the work room where Spock and T'Prenn were bent over the opened Clems device. They had been working on it since early morning, making all the intricate adjustments needed to double its masking capacity. When Kirk had first expounded his plan to use the Clems for an infiltration of Star Fleet Command, Spock had, predictably, gone to great lengths dissuade him. Failing at that, the Vulcan had then decided that their miniature cloaking device would have to be altered to work for two bodies, since Kirk was not going alone -- also as predicted.

T'Prenn was performing the final alterations, utilizing a variety of miniaturized tools, while Spock watched from across the counter. Spock was an A-5 expert in micro-electronics, but had long since come to appreciate his wife's greater expertise in that specialty, so allowed her most of the work while he sat by to render any required assistance or advice.

Quite a while later she straightened, pushing the magnifying lenses aside, grasped the Clems firmly before activating it. Spock reached to the floor for the tricorder and snapped it on. Just as it had all morning, the screen showed only one life form in the room -- his own. T'Prenn extended an arm across the counter and clasped his wrist, and Spock's reading flickered out. She removed her hand and the reading reappeared, touched him again and, once more, it vanished. The two Vulcans exchanged a satisfied glance, but made no verbal announcement of success.

With that task now out of the way, Spock opened a drawer and drew out another project: a nearly completed tranquilizer pistol. Since he and Jim would be unable to carry any transtater-based equipment when they invaded the Records Department, they had decided to make their own dart guns to serve in lieu of phasers. Spock resumed assembly of the firing mechanism, while T'Prenn deactivated the Clems and set about welding on its cover.

"You must make certain Kirk realizes the importance of maintaining physical contact," she reminded.

"I shall, T'Prenn, but there is no need for special concern. Captain Kirk has had vast experience with similar undertakings."

"I do not mean to fault his experience; however the fact remains, he is a Human. It is possible that, in a moment of jeopardy, he could become... excited, and break away from you. One second apart would be sufficient to reveal your presence."

Even with his attention primarily on his work, Spock could tell when T'Prenn was employing evasive subtlety. "My wife, if you have a suggestion to make, I would prefer you do so outright."

The Vulcan woman fused the last seam and pushed the Clems aside. "It would be far more logical for me to accompany you to Star Fleet Command, and for Kirk to remain here. From what I have learned from Uhura, technical prowess will be as essential as steadfastness to effect a break-in. I possess far more of both than does James Kirk."

Spock kept his gaze studiously on the weapon in his hands. He had been expecting her to make the offer -- it was an obvious and logical one. "I tend to agree. However, factors other than logic are at work here. Since Jim initiated the plan, it is unlikely he will consent to being left behind... and, from past observation, I suspect he would not, in any case. Uhura is presently acquainting us with the field of expertise needed to gain access to the files, so the technical aspects should present no problem. And we are so accustomed to working as a team, it should more than compensate for Jim's tendency toward overt emotionalism in moments of crisis."

For the next several minutes T'Prenn was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was slow and very soft. "You said truer than you knew: factors other than logic are at work here."

This time Spock did look up. T'Prenn had both hands before her chest, reaching forward -- an unprecedented gesture of earnestness. "I do not wish separation from you, Spock. I have... fear it may be permanent."

It was an anxiety they all shared, Spock knew -- that he and Jim might be captured by the Rodinium Shield, and never be heard from again. "That possibility is all the more reason why you must remain with our children. I have fear of what would become of them if they were to lose both parents. You already know that, in the event something goes seriously wrong, I shall warn you of it via our Bond. If you find yourself experiencing severe stress, or severance, then you, Uhura, and the children are to take one of the transport-vessels and go to Vulcan. I have already notified my export

fleet captains that you are to be in command during my absence. Bring with you all the documents hidden over the siyul desk, and give them to the Vulcan Council. Those might be sufficient to let our allies move against the Rodinium Shield -- possibly even in time to send help to Jim and me. If not, then you will at least be safe among our people."

Spock stared incredulously at the piercing sadness in his wife's eyes. She turned her head, ashamed of having revealed the emotion. She almost whispered. "Have you given no thought to what I would be left with? To spend the remainder of my life with only memories of you, knowing what our bonding would have been, if I had only sought earlier to discover whether or not you were truly Drelfshant?"

The echo of T'Prenn's anguish crossed Spock's features. "The fault was equally my own, T'Prenn. If I had made some effort to convince you..."

If -- the most pointless word in the universe. If he had, those four years of cold indifference might never have happened. He and T'Prenn might have built their future together, relying on each other's strengths, easing each other's loneliness. So much precious time wasted, perhaps never to be made up for now. Spock rose and walked around the workbench to his Bondsmate. She remained motionless, her gaze still averted. He extended two fingers into her line of vision. After a long moment she returned the embrace, and Spock directed assurance of his forgiveness over the point of contact. T'Prenn met her husband's eyes again, her emotional controls swiftly reasserting themselves, and Spock changed the projection, helping her accept that reality which made their parting necessary.

"There is no help for it," Spock said gently. "I must leave. You must stay here, even at the risk of my life and your peace. Still, you may derive some comfort from this: if our effort against the Shield is successful, then you and I need never make such a mistake again... Thanyar Nrev."

T'Prenn's eyes widened. Thanyar Nrev -- 'Keeper of my Years' -- was a term used only between mates who had been bonded for over a century. Instantly she understood why Spock had bestowed the name on her now; he might not have a chance to speak it at the proper time. But, if he did survive, this was his pledge that those years would be everything they should be. She pressed her fingers more firmly against his, sending her own message -- the same promise. Spock shut his eyes in acceptance, then, with no little reluctance, withdrew his hand.

"We must tell Jim the Clems is ready," he reminded.

T'Prenn nodded, lifting the device from the counter. Neither of them spoke as they left the room together. The sunbeams had stretched to the further wall.



Careful thought had been required to determine the absolute minimum volume of equipment needed for their Record's Department invasion, but Kirk was now confident he had achieved the best possible balance. Once more he read over his list, comparing it with the two stacks of paraphernalia spread out on the living room table. A five-day supply of compacted food. Personal care items. Forged ID cards. A variety of gadgets to be used for getting past the scanners and into the files. A small tape player. Two broad canvas equipment belts, sporting holsters and lined with multiple compartments (T'Prenn and Uhura were presently in the workroom, completing the final details on the dart guns.) And, in Kirk's pile, the Clems device in a pouch with a chest strap. Jim had finally yielded to Spock's argument on that issue; since a Vulcan was much less likely than a human to break under interrogation, it would be safer for the Conspiracy if Kirk carried the Clems, and with it, the lesser chance of being detected and caught, should physical separation become unavoidable.

Finally satisfied that everything was present and accounted for, the captain set about packing it all into the two belts. He had nearly finished when Spock emerged from the siyul. The Vulcan had been there for the past hour, checking all the latest news releases on his viewer, just in case something had occurred that might make it necessary for them to delay this mission. It seemed to Kirk that he appeared inordinately grim as he crossed the room, but when he reached the table, all he said was: "No problems, Jim."

Kirk nodded, pushed the last few items into the belts and handed the lighter one to Spock. The Vulcan looked it over critically, then tested the fit over his new clothing. He was dressed, as was Kirk, in a dark canvas jacket and trousers -- tough, serviceable and concealing.

"If you can think of anything else we might need, say so now."

"The matter is not urgent, Jim. The Intrepid II will willingly provide us with anything we request."

"Yes, but that'll show up as irregularities on their Quarter Master's records. We'd better avoid leaving any trace of our passing on this trip." Kirk checked his wrist chronometer. Less than half an hour remained before the Driscolls were scheduled to arrive with their shuttle. He had meant to leave more time for making his farewells. "Spock, I'm not as well-versed as I should be in Vulcan manners. What would be the most appropriate way for me to say good-bye to T'Prenn?"

"A short, undemonstrative statement of appreciation for the benefits gained by your association with her will be best. For T'Pryr, T'Parin and James, a simple 'Live long and prosper' is sufficient. I believe they are in the workroom also; T'Prenn wanted to give them a lesson on miniaturized mechanisms."



Mention of the youngsters reminded Kirk of something he had meant to discuss with his friend long before now. "Speaking of them -- there's something that's been bothering me from the first day I came here. I wondered if you could take care of it before we leave." The Vulcan looked receptive, but Jim hesitated, given pause by that same reluctance to intrude on family matters which had kept him from bringing it up in the past. But, reminding himself that this was his last chance, he plunged on. "It would make me... feel better about everything we went through if you were to give your family name to your children."

A fleeting but unmistakable expression of astonishment crossed Spock's face. "T'Prenn made that same request, six months ago."

It was Kirk's turn to look surprised. "Then why didn't you do it?"

"I judged it would be preferable to wait until the Conspiracy had achieved its purpose, and the stigma against my name was removed."

And a few weeks ago, it seemed we were right on the verge of achieving it.

A bitter moment of silence followed, then Kirk touched the Vulcan's shoulder. "My friend, I don't think you'd better wait any longer. There's a possibility we won't be coming back, you know."

"Yes. I know." Spock pursed his lips for a moment, and nodded decisively. "Very well. A brief ritual will be required. If you would please light that fire-pot and remain here..." He indicated a sphere of gold filagree and copper on a shelf high over the table.

"Certainly, Spock." As the Vulcan vanished down the hallway to the workroom, Kirk lifted down the covascating globe and set it on the tabletop, pausing a minute to admire the workmanship. There were a number of beautiful firepots in Spock's home, but this one was striking, even in that company. In fact, Kirk didn't recall ever seeing it in use before. Careful scrutiny told him it was a self-lighter, with igniting chemicals along the rims of its two hemispheres, and one wide hole in the top. With proper reverence, Jim gripped the upper hemisphere, gave it a single sharp twist, and was rewarded as a steady red flame sprouted from the hole.

That done, he leaned against the wall to wait, letting his gaze travel idly about the room. For a minute it lingered on the door to the siyul; early site of so many peaceful nights of quiet talk and contemplation, and later, so many intense days of pitting all his mental resources against the Rodinium Shield. Beyond it, the homey hemlock grove where he had become acquainted with Spock's children -- lovely, all of them. His eyes moved on, to the fountain where he had been introduced to T'Prenn -- regal, tragic, fiercely intelligent T'Prenn... blasted shame, that he'd never gotten to know her better.

Memory after memory replayed itself; of happiness and grief, contentment and obsessive striving, profound hate and deepest love. His own words to Spock returned to him: 'There's a possibility we won't be coming back.' Now that he thought on it, it was virtually certain they wouldn't resume their

lives on Eskar, whether they succeeded or failed. Kirk hadn't thought he could feel any real attachment for the planet or this house, but now he discovered he regretted the prospect of never seeing them again. After all, it had been his home since Brewster, and it was here he had been allowed to rest and find himself again. Looking back, Jim could cite every stage of that healing. Those soul-soothing evenings in the siyul, renewing his friendship with Spock, his first voyage in command of the Phoenix -- resurrecting drives and self-confidence that had been dead in him for years -- and finally, the revelation of the memo which had completed the process. And, of course, the more spectacular events after he and Spock had formed the Phoenix Conspiracy -- the shared risks which had welded the bond between them, and all their friends, tighter than ever; the keen thrill of danger experienced on every conspiracy-related voyage; the quiet relief of knowing he'd reached a safe haven every time he came home...

He had grown fond of this place so subtly that he'd never realized it before this moment, and he now knew he was going to miss it. Well, if they did win, there was no reason why he couldn't visit it sometime. Like an old warrior returning to the scene of his greatest battle... Oh, not quite Jim. This is where you read about other people's battles. Your own battle is still ahead. In Star Fleet Command.

But it wasn't. The most trying struggle was still to come -- inside Star Fleet Command, the very heart of the enemy's domain.

Kirk was relieved to have his train of thought broken by Spock's return. The Vulcan had donned a floor-length black mantle, and a royally majestic bearing. He strode to the table and carefully positioned the firepot near the edge before addressing the human.

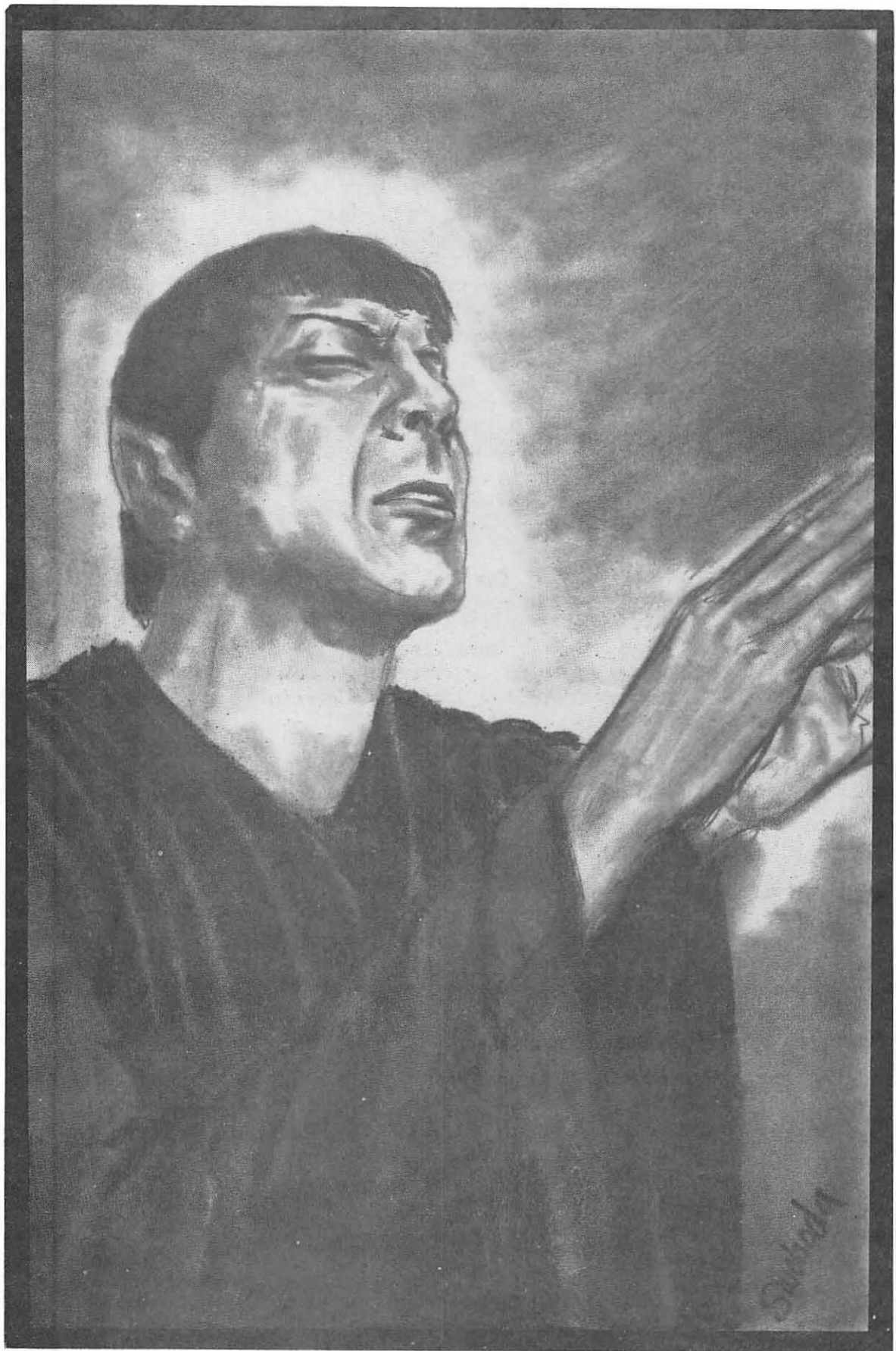
"T'Prenn shall escort the children here as soon as she has finished explaining what is to take place. The Naming Ceremony shall be conducted close to the Flame of Identity. You, Uhura, and T'Pryr will stand to one side and act as witnesses."

Although slightly intimidated by the Vulcan's authoritative tone and demeanor, Kirk asked, "Isn't T'Pryr going to participate?"

"T'Pryr bears the family name of her own father, Shaklam. It would be an unexcusable insult to his memory for anyone to suggest she should discard it." Jim was spared having to apologize by Spock's sudden turn toward the hallway. The human automatically imitated Spock's position, clasping his hands behind his back, and seconds later heard the others approaching in solemn procession.

T'Prenn entered first, erect and proud, moving like some vision of aristocratic grace. The children followed in single file.

T'Pryr, now a statuesque sixteen, her effortless dignity matching that of either parent.



T'Parin, painstakingly keeping in step, looking as stately as was possible for a seven-year old. And James, just three, with ever-curious eyes fixed on the red flame, being guided by a respectfully sober Uhura in a long, wine-red gown. The Vulcans all wore long black ceremonial capes, with touches of metallic embroidery.

As Uhura stepped out of the line to join Kirk, T'Prenn directed the children to stand in a straight row beside the firepot. Then she looked to Spock. "Husband, T'Pryr has requested that she be included in the Naming."

Spock compromised his regal stance by turning a quizzical expression on the older girl. "I am not thy father, T'Pryr. And Shalkam was a man worthy of great honor."

The young woman lifted her chin and replied in a surprisingly mature voice. "I give all deserved honor to my father's memory, but thou art worthy of very much more, Spock Mainkaltrun\*. I wish to give it by unifying myself with thy family, which is my prerogative as Offspring-of-the-previous-Bonding."

It took an effort for Spock to maintain his ceremonial bearing in the face of this double tribute from his stepdaughter. "'What is thy choice shall be thine'," he responded, speaking the ritual words in English as a courtesy to the human witnesses. T'Pryr nodded in acceptance, and T'Prenn assumed her own position, standing behind the children. Their three faces displayed the full spectrum of comprehension. T'Pryr was serenely appreciative. T'Parin, not fully understanding, was careful to maintain her most serious expression. James, realizing only that something special was about to take place, stared at his father in wide-eyed wonder.

The ceremony began. Jim and Uhura watched, entranced, as Spock brought his hands before his chest, palms up and close together. Slowly, he closed his eyes and tilted his head back, until his profile was nearly parallel with the ceiling. The three Vulcan women bowed their heads -- T'Prenn's hand gently making sure James' did so, too.

"Ennarn, mofiestkon k'tem garsevya halikashg nostrava," Spock intoned, his voice so velvety and deep that Kirk felt a chill along his spine. It sounded like some kind of other-worldly music, rich with ageless meaning and mystery. Spock straightened his neck and looked down at his family, standing like sculptured figures. He lowered his hands to them, stooping slightly so James could reach them. Each youngster placed a hand in his palms, and Spock enfolded them all in a gentle clasp.

"Kahseeonta, shzgatanuk," he recited softly, gazing at their bent heads. He sent one warm glance to Jim, telling the human everything he'd ever hoped about what these three meant to him, then announced in his most resonant tone:

"Thee are flesh of my flesh, light of my light, dark of my dark; thee, and thine own, until the last setting of our family's sun. Thee are..."

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\* Vulcan: one who seeks to reveal Truth.

The name that flowed from Spock's lips sounded purely spontaneous, as though produced by some unduplicatable accident. But, seconds later, T'Prenn slowly repeated the intricate syllables, and added, "Nreshave."

Spock released their hands, reached to the firepot and extinguished the flame, signaling the ceremony's end. As the children began to stir and raise their heads, Kirk heard Uhura emit a soft moaning sound beside him. He knew exactly how she felt. It was with a vague sense of sacrilege that he glanced at his wrist chronometer.

"Spock, our shuttle will be here any minute," he almost whispered.

"Acknowledged." Spock turned toward his children once more. Time for good-byes -- perhaps the last he would ever make. He extended the two-finger embrace to James and T'Parin in turn. Much more familiar with this ritual, they both returned it unhesitantly, each receiving their father's personal farewell message across that touch. When he reached T'Pryr, Spock carefully removed the mantle from his shoulders and pressed it into her palm. Their other hands clasped warmly, both transmitting their gratitude.

Spock finally stepped back and gestured for Kirk to come forward. Realizing it was his own turn, Jim did so. For an awkward instant he stood, trying to remember what Spock had advised. He raised his arm, arranging his fingers into the Vulcan hand-sign. The youngsters returned it, their six intelligent, onyx eyes fixed on his face.

"Live long and prosper, T'Pryr, T'Parin... James. Behave yourselves. Do what you mother tells you, until we get back." He felt uncomfortable, combining Vulcan and human traditional farewells, but no one appeared to disapprove. Spock's children returned the ritual Vulcan words, then, at their father's silent command, filed out of the room.

That left T'Prenn. Jim faced her squarely, and tried to make his voice unemotional and appreciative at the same time. "Lady T'Prenn, I am very much enriched for having known you."

"And I am more complete for having known you, James Kirk," T'Prenn returned, her dark, dark eyes looking deep into his to leave no doubt that she really meant it. She was... incredibly beautiful. Why in the galaxy had he never noticed it before?

As her face turned slowly toward Spock, Kirk withdrew. This would be no simple touching of hands, not between Bondsmates who might be parting for the last time. Already, Kirk could see Spock's fingers arranging themselves in the proper position for the mind meld. Jim touched Uhura's arm, and she, understanding instantly, let him guide her around the corner into the kitchen area so that the Vulcans would have some privacy.

Also, they probably wouldn't care to witness the messy emotional scene when I say good-bye to Uhura, Kirk considered as he faced the Bantu woman. Uhura stood rigidly, her eyes composed, wide, and bright around the edges. The captain stepped close to her. "Uhura, I... "

She threw her arms around him, burying her head against his shoulder, and he felt wetness against his neck. He stroked her back, trying to soothe her.

"It's going to be all right," he whispered into her ear. "We'll win... I promise. We'll send for you in just a few weeks; when it's all over. We'll be together again."

"I know." Uhura relaxed her embrace a little, and pulled her head back to give him a brave smile. Kirk returned it, and kissed her lips.

"We'll win," he reiterated, and with some reluctance they both dropped their arms. Then, very cautiously, Jim looked around the corner to check on Spock and T'Prenn. The Vulcans had disengaged their meld but remained standing close together, their gazes still locked -- his filled with tenderness and resolution, hers with the same anguish and pride with which women through the ages, on thousands of worlds, had seen their men off to war. For the second time in twenty minutes, Jim felt awed, recognizing the depth of feeling possible between a man and a woman. Such a change in only a few months!

The ill-mannered door-chimes rang. Sterling and Alma must have arrived, but, as they had previously been instructed, would remain outside until Kirk and Spock came to them.

The two Vulcans slumped just a little, eyes downcast. T'Prenn lifted her head first, glancing tiredly at the watching humans, then at Spock again.

"Marsev corobion," were her last words to her bondsmate. She turned, and walked from the room without looking back.

Uhura walked directly up to Spock, and for an awful instant Jim thought she was going to give the same good-bye to the Vulcan that she had given Kirk. But Uhura only clasped one of Spock's hands affectionately between her own.

"Well... Take care of yourself, Mr. Spock." She jerked her head toward Kirk. "And be sure to take care of him. I'm counting on you." Her voice was getting dangerously tight. She swallowed hard, averting her face. Spock's hand went under her chin and gently turned it back.

"(There will be another meeting)" he stated matter-of-factly.

Swahili, Kirk immediately recognized. He didn't understand the exact words, but, of course, Uhura did. They seemed to steady her.

"Oh! Don't forget these!" Uhura reached to her sash and extracted their dart guns. "Careless of me, I almost forgot about them."

The two men holstered the weapons. No reason remained to delay departure, yet, for a few seconds, all three of them just stood there.



"We're keeping the Driscolls waiting," Kirk finally said. Spock nodded. As one, they started for the door. Just beyond the archway, they both paused and glanced back. Uhura was still in the center of the room, looking heart-wrenchingly small and isolated. Meeting their eyes, she waved a hand, once. Kirk started to return the wave, but had to clutch at his own throat instead, where muscles were starting to bunch up painfully.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he hissed, taking Spock's arm with his other hand and hurrying them down the hallway.



This time it was Spock's turn to stay silent and brooding all the way to the rendezvous point. Immediately after entering the shuttle he had taken his place in that same back seat and stayed there, hunched in his chair with his fingers steepled before his face -- his expression one of restrained melancholy. Kirk could only guess he must be reacting to the forced separation from his family. Wrenching them apart, just as their relationships were starting to become what they should be, seemed to Jim as cruel as anything else the Rodinium Shield had ever been responsible for.

Up front, the Driscolls sat across from each other at the main console. Sterling had come along to offer moral support to his departing comrades-in-arms, and to receive their final orders. The latter was a task left entirely to Kirk.

"I've already stowed the Phoenix on Eskar, for T'Prenn's use. Commander Azzara can be trusted to obey orders if T'Prenn gets... the signal, to flee to Vulcan. Your job will be to monitor the rendezvous point, in case we have to come back, or send a message. Keep the Mithenvar within communication's range of Sector L-37's border, but under no circumstances allow any Federation vessel to approach you before you've heard the codeword. Even then, use all possible precautions -- take off at the first sign of weaponry or tractor-beams being activated. If T'Prenn does send you word that she's on her way to Vulcan, that will be your warning that our mission has encountered severe difficulty. At worst, it will mean we've been taken prisoner -- but you are not to attempt any rescue. Spock and I have every attention of dying -- by our own hands, if necessary -- before we'll betray any other member of the Phoenix Conspiracy. However, since the Shield's capacity for... extracting information, is an unknown quality, you'd all better assume you're wanted names. My advice would be for you to accompany T'Prenn to Vulcan and seek political asylum from the Council, but that will have to be your decision. Too many factors could change between now and then for me to give you any orders about how to deal with that situation. The voyage to Vulcan may very well be as dangerous as anything else you could do, but, at that point, there may be no really safe alternatives left. Follow your own best judgement."

"Yes, sir," the Driscolls replied in one depressed voice, and Kirk had to stifle the urge to sigh out loud. This succession of morose final encounters was having a dampening effect on his spirits -- just when they ought to

be mustering in preparation for the task ahead. Getting into some honest-to-goodness danger would be almost a relief -- anything to dispel this suffocating cloud of gloom.

"How much further to rendezvous point, Commander?" he asked crisply.

Almarine checked her instruments. "Just coming into scanner range now. Mmmm... I think I'm reading the Intrepid, right on schedule this time."

Kirk waited until the usual cautious approach and confirmation of identities had been performed before he moved aft to gently shake the Vulcan from his trance. "Come on out of it, Spock. Our taxi's here."

Spock looked up slowly, blinking. But his eyes cleared instantly as they spotted the white form beyond the viewing port, and he got to his feet with resolute grace. "I am ready, Jim."

"Make preparations for teleportation," an impassive voice -- feminine this time -- instructed from the communication's grid. "Shuttlecraft, please remain standing by after beam-up, to receive any additional messages."

"Acknowledged," Sterling answered, as Alma brought the shuttle to a full halt. The Driscolls rose simultaneously, clasping hands -- just as they always did when they were standing close together -- and turned to face their Conspiracy leaders.

Kirk tried to project an image of total confidence. "Good-bye for now, Sterling and Almarine. I expect to be seeing you again soon -- in a happier time." He gave them what he hoped was a self-assured grin.

Sterling nodded at each man in turn; respectfully to Kirk, gratefully to Spock. "Best of luck to both of you. And... Spock, however this turns out; thanks for the second chance."

Almarine was doing her best to maintain a military stance, but the pain in her eyes was obvious, and she added softly, "God be with you."

"And with you, also," Spock replied gravely, causing Kirk to send him a surprised glance. Never imagine you know everything there is to know about a Vulcan.

With a single swift motion, Alma pushed her hair back from her face and gave the Intrepid II the signal to energize. That hand, statuesquely arched over the instrument panel, was the last thing Kirk happened to see, before a sensation from another existence began to prick over his skin.

And then the walls of a transporter chamber sprang into existence around him, provoking such a jolt of déjà vu that, in the first disoriented instant, he was startled to see unfamiliar faces in the room. There were three of them: a rail-thin female Vulcan operating the console, a square-faced, powerfully built male who could only be Captain Selif, and a middle-aged woman in a medical uniform, whose unusually large, thoughtful eyes gave her a deceptively youthful appearance.

Kirk had started to step down from the platform before he remembered that, as a visitor, he was expected to remain where he was until greetings had been exchanged. This custom had roots in pre-logic Vulcan, when travelers entering another clan's territory would express their non-warlike intent by remaining just within the border until approached by the territory holders. Fortunately for Kirk, none of the full-Vulcans present appeared to notice his breach of etiquette. All of them had their attention fixed on the still figure beside him -- and Spock himself looked as though he had expected nothing else from them.

Captain Selif came forward first, bringing his hands up into a configuration Kirk had never seen before; fingers curled into loose fists and knuckles pressed together just before Selif's throat -- a gesture which managed to convey both formidability and a willingness to be commanded.

"Kaykarnka orshemyur, hesharku, yarsaljevc, orla-shaymor," the Vulcan captain stated, his voice vibrant with respect -- even reverence. This, too, Spock appeared to accept as only his due. Kirk was unpleasantly startled at this transformation from the man who had responded so compassionately to a series of sentimental human farewells. Selif, however, was unperturbed. His mild black eyes shifted to Jim for a second before he lowered his hands and addressed Spock in English. "Command of this vessel, crew, and myself, is at your disposal, Mainkaltrun."

"I accept Command," the half-Vulcan replied, almost loftily. By now, Kirk suspected that Spock might be taking a small revenge for the demeaning way his people had treated him after his courtmartial. Or, maybe not; Kirk was not informed enough about Vulcan manners to know that Spock's behavior wasn't exactly what the situation called for. But Jim was given no more time to wonder about it, for Selif was turning towards him.

"You, also, are greatly welcomed and honored here, James Kirk of Terra."

"My appreciation, Captain," Jim answered with a polite bow. Never mind if Spock remained as stiff as trititanium.

Now the older Vulcan woman came forward, and Kirk noticed a tightly folded bit of paper in her hand. "May I present my Chief Surgeon, Doctor T'Thame," Selif announced, without even looking behind him.

T'Thame repeated the two-fisted gesture for Spock, then looked to Kirk, and extended the paper.

"Arlamank Kirk; this is a of concern to you both, but particularly for you, from Surgeon General Johannson," she explained. (A voice like a slow, deep river, some part of Kirk's mind noted.) "I visited her at the Command Base to deliver your instructions -- that she make preparations for your infiltration of the Records Department. Immediately after I had finished speaking, Johannson wrote this, and instructed me to deliver it to you immediately upon your arrival aboard the Intrepid II."

Kirk thanked her and took the note, stepping to where Spock could see as he unfolded it. It turned out to be an ordinary interoffice memo, covered with sharply slanted handwriting. Kirk had to tilt the sheet a bit to the left as he read:

TO: J and S, FROM: S J

Your orders have been received, and will be carried out to the best of my ability. However, I must also warn you just how hazardous an undertaking you are planning. The entire RS is in Red Alert -- they know U had help with her escape and are hell-bent on finding out who gave it. All non-S members are being subjected to twice the usual amount of surveillance, and Base security measures are being tripled. Worse; if I read the signs correctly, Admiral K now considers this conflict a personal vendetta. It was very humiliating for him, to have the only conspirator he's been able to catch vanish out of his stronghold, and there's nothing in this universe he hates more than humiliation. He'd like nothing better than a chance to even the score -- which means; if either or both of you do fall into his hands, your disposition is going to be extremely unauthorized. It may not even be a matter of your simply being killed. They'll first try to get the names of the remaining conspiracy members (and I hope you know better than to underestimate what they're capable of), and once they've taken as much as they can from you, they'll most likely send you someplace too remote for anyone to locate. Very probably, to any of the thousands of primitive 'hands-off' planets outside the Federation -- most likely one of those half-developed worlds where slavery is still practiced. You could be integrated into such a society very easily -- even profitably.

At this point, Kirk had to pause to take a couple deep breaths -- a steadying method he'd learned at the Academy. He had to admit, this was one possibility he hadn't considered before. Death was one thing, but enslavement... The human stole a glance at Spock, and, reassured by his friend's undisturbed countenance, read on.

Your initial impulse will probably be to immediately reject my next suggestion. However, it involves several definite advantages, so please think about it carefully. I believe it would be far more prudent for me to go after that document. I have unimpeded access to the base, am intimately familiar with the territory, and, if I am caught, occupy too prominent an office for the RS to even consider doing a disappearing trick with me. Both of you -- especially J -- have reputations for always wanting to take the greatest risks yourselves, but I remind you; who accomplishes this task will be of no consequence, all that matters is success.

Right on both counts, Johansson, Kirk admitted to himself, as he began to seriously consider her proposal. His cerebral cortex and his viscera reacted differently. Part of the reason he had come on this expedition was to break out of that debilitating pattern of always having things done for him -- but when he'd made the decision, he had not taken into account that the danger might be less for the Surgeon General. Or was it? With the Shield-bearers as desperate as indicated, how could she be certain they would not

dare to do such things even to her? But, being Base personnel, she might indeed stand a better chance of eluding capture than himself, or Spock... Once more, Kirk looked to his friend, who was also pondering the letter. Their eyes met. Jim recognized a trace of worry in those onyx depths, and realized that for Spock, too, the biggest anxiety was not over what could happen to himself.

"What do you think, Spock?"

The half-Vulcan tilted his head slightly. "Ms. Johansson does have a valid argument, Captain. The comparative perils are suf... "

"Ah, but the major concern is not whether we or Sigrid Johansson will be putting ourselves in more danger. The real point of contention is: which alternative will better safeguard our Cause?" Kirk gnawed his lower lip for a second, thinking hard. "And I say; for the sake of the Conspiracy's mission, we'd better make sure that Sigrid's role remains as passive as possible. She's in possession of the largest part of all our secured documents. If the Shield is given any reason to suspect her of being a Conspirator, she'll be arrested, her residence searched, our evidence almost certainly found and confiscated. The Conspiracy's work would be undone at one stroke -- we can't take that chance. Bad as our own capture will be, it'll at least do less damage than hers. We've got to carry out this mission as originally planned."

The last statement was made in a very decisive tone, but all the Vulcans were still watching Spock, as though only his decision would be accepted as the final one. He remained deeply in thought for a moment, before nodding his acquiescence.

"Agreed." Spock snapped his face back toward their waiting host. "Captain Selif, you may give our shuttlecraft permission to return to base."

Selif nodded, returned to the transporter console, and opened a channel to the bridge. "Commander T'Tonya; it has been decided our assignment will proceed as scheduled. Implement previous instructions."

"Acknowledged," responded that same matter-of-fact female who had addressed the shuttle. Less than a minute later the general hum of activated machinery sounded beneath the decks, and a vague vibration which indicated the ship was back in motion.

"Our arrival at Star Fleet Command shall occur approximately 15.674 standard days from now, barring any unexpected deviations from our present course and speed," Selif stated. "I have already had a cabin prepared for your use until that time. If you wish, I shall take you there now, and then give you a tour of the ship."

The visitors were both agreeable. As they stepped down from the platform, Selif motioned Spock to his side. "If you will pardon us, Kirk, Spock and I have a confidential matter to discuss." The two Vulcans began to converse in low tones, leaving Jim to trail behind them as the group exited the transporter room. But Kirk's sense of being left out lasted only until they reached the corridor. He had known that the Intrepid II had been

constructed on the same plan as his Enterprise, but found himself unprepared for the full impact of that resemblance. A flood of old memories welled up, threatening to bring on all kinds of emotional displays -- something he was certain his hosts would not appreciate. In an effort to distract himself, he turned his attention to the various crew persons passing by. And various they were; sporting every skin and hair color known to Vulcan -- their ages ranging from adolescent to ancient. But they all reacted the same way upon recognizing the newcomers. Each one in turn performed that joined-knuckle symbol for Spock, then flashed the standard V-shaped hand sight to Kirk. Evidently they, like Captain Selif, held Spock in greater honor -- no doubt due to the fact that it was he who had been wronged by Vulcan. Kirk could hardly begrudge him the extra deference, but it did feel rather odd, to have their statuses from the Enterprise days so totally reversed.

Eventually they reached their destination: a standard two-person cabin on Deck Six. There they were met by a brown-haired Vulcan of perhaps 150, with a loosely-wrapped parcel under his arm. While Selif introduced him as Lieutenant-Commander Srenk, the ship's Quarter Master, Srenk gave the two manual gestures to Kirk and Spock, then handed Jim the package.

"What's this?" The human inquired as he started to open one end.

The elderly Vulcan explained in a desert-dry voice. "Star Fleet has been conducting unannounced inspections of ships with increasing frequency of late. Should an Investigation Team come aboard the Intrepid II unexpectedly, we shall, of course, conceal you immediately. But the possibility of your being sighted from a distance is unavoidable, so you shall be safer if you appear as though you belong here."

Even as he listened, Kirk uncovered a neatly folded bundle of cloth and leather. Star Fleet uniforms! Engineering red and science-section blue tunics, both with Commander's stripes, just like those worn on the Enterprise. The only modifications were the IDICs, fastened to the chests in place of insignia.

"I recommend that you put them on now. I shall wait here, until you are ready to see the ship," Captain Selif offered.

"That will be quite acceptable, thank you," Kirk replied, while Spock made some similar statement in his own language. The two of them entered the cabin (also identical to those of the Enterprise) and proceeded to change. Jim watched his friend pull on the blue shirt, amazed at how deeply the sight moved him. It was like beholding a living image from the past; the Spock he had known through his first year in command of the Enterprise, complete with all those coolly formal Vulcan mannerisms he'd nearly forgotten.

"Of course," Kirk murmured as he suddenly realized why his friend's behavior had seemed so abnormally stiff since their arrival on the Intrepid II. The close proximity of so many of his own people had brought his Spock's pure Vulcan self to the surface; a self which Jim had grown so unaccustomed to that it seemed more unfeeling than it actually was.



The human smoothed his own tunic into place, and for a few seconds just stood, savoring the touch of that distinct fabric against his skin. "Feels almost like stepping into a time machine, doesn't it?"

Spock paused from fastening his trousers to lift an impassive eyebrow. "To what are you referring, Captain?"

"Us, being together on a Star Ship again; seeing you in that uniform... It's bringing out moods and thought-patterns I haven't known since... For this one moment I could almost believe the last six years never happened."

"Ah, yes. The human emotional state known as 'nostalgia'"

Kirk's mouth twitched with annoyance. "I would have thought you'd be enjoying this situation even more -- or haven't you noticed that everybody around here is treating you like a demigod?"

Spock, who had been bending over to pull on his boots, straightened abruptly. "If you are referring to that joined-hand gesture, it merely signifies participation in a ritual... repayment, for the injustice done to me. You have no cause to feel slighted."

Kirk's momentary resentment dissolved. "I don't -- not really. I think it's entirely appropriate for your people to... "

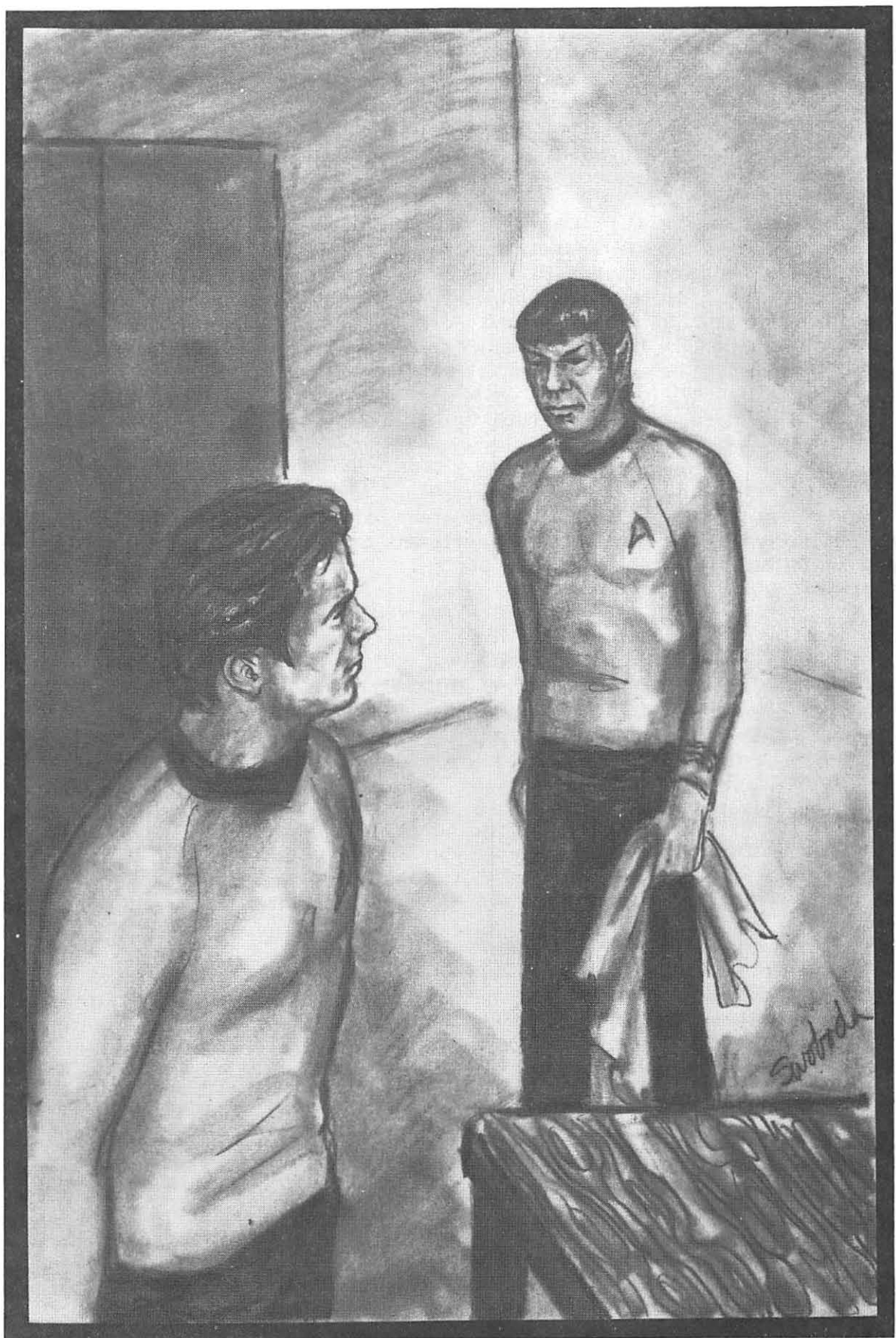
"It is logical of them," Spock responded frostily. "There is nothing 'appropriate' about it."

This time it was Kirk's turn to raise his eyebrows. Surely Spock realized he'd just made a totally incongruous statement? But, no, his attitude was totally serious... and Jim suddenly felt a laugh coming up. For a few seconds he managed to stifle it, and then he started laughing so hard that he had to brace himself against the desk.

Spock's initial reaction was startlement, then concern mixed with vague disapproval. "Captain, this display is most... Sir, are you quite all right? Cap... " He finally shook the human by the arm, in an effort to bring him out of it -- but even as he did, he found himself being affected by Jim's mood; gradually thawing -- until he was wearing his near-smile -- , and clasping Kirk's shoulder affectionately. "Jim, do tell me what it is that you find so amusing."

"It's... oh, Spock! It's you!" Kirk managed to gasp between galluphs. "What ever possessed you to say that we'd turned you into a human? No human could ever... "

Spock's eyes widened slightly, and his lips parted -- but Jim, whose sides hurt too much to laugh any more, got serious and held a hand up before Spock could make any reply. "Don't bother answering; I think I already know. My theory is that you compared yourself with your ideal of perfect Vulcanness and found yourself falling short, so you concluded you were human. But, if you really understood what 'human' is, you'd realize you don't qualify for that, either."



The half-Vulcan tilted his head, obviously intrigued. "Indeed. And what, then, do you theorize I am?"

"You? You, my thrice-beloved friend, are your own species -- a mixture of Vulcan and Human traits which combine, and sometimes clash, to create one unique personality." His tone turned the adjective into a complement of the highest order.

Spock's gaze, which had softened thoughtfully, now strayed to the glittering brooch just below his shoulder. Kirk let his expression get serious as he reached out and touched it -- circle and triangle united. "Yes; that's what I mean. You're a personification of the IDIC; the product of two diversities merged to create a new Form." He signed gently as his finger traced the perimeter of the ornament. "It hasn't been very easy for you, has it?"

Spock's eyes met Kirk's with undisguised warmth. "More so now, than it once was... before you."

Kirk returned the loving stare, proud for both of them, that they could make such admissions now with no fear of misunderstanding. But this moment, like all the others, was shortened by outside forces. Jim straightened, tugging his shirt back into place. "Captain Selif must be wondering if we're ever going to come out."

At this reminder of where they were, Spock's expression slipped back into proper Vulcan composure, and Kirk followed suit. The human indicated the door with a grand sweep of his arm. "After you, most honored Mainkaltran. Whatever that means."

Spock hesitated. "Jim, if you would prefer to be treated with respect equal to mine, I could request..."

"No, no. You've earned your turn at the pinnacle. And, to tell the truth, I'm rather curious to see how you handle yourself there."

His friend looked appreciative. "I, too, might find such a study... fascinating."

So Spock, too, had wondered what it would have been like, if their ranks aboard the Enterprise had been reversed. Now that they were about to find out, they allowed themselves a shared moment of pleased anticipation before filing out of the room -- both of them picture-perfect images of Vulcan imperviousness.



Life aboard the Intrepid II, although outwardly similar to that of any other starship, proved to be significantly different from anything Kirk and Spock had known on the Enterprise. Every vessel in the fleet had its own personality, of course. The Intrepid's was distinctly Vulcan, with stringent efficiency and ten-decimal precision routine in every department. Off-duty

activities were invariably decorous, making the ship as a whole the quietest Kirk had ever traveled on. He was grateful for the discrepancies, for they kept his recollections from becoming too painfully acute. And he suspected that Spock appreciated the differences too, but for radically different reasons.

The two conspiracy leaders spent most of their waking hours studying the latest maps of Star Fleet Command's interior and defense systems, or rehearsing their break-in on the storage decks. Duplicates of Base guard-devices had been installed there for their use, and Kirk and Spock practiced applying their burglary tools to these until forced entry past electronic obstacles became a conditioned reflex to both of them.

The dreaded surprise inspection never occurred, but, after some discussion of the matter, the Conspiracy leaders decided to retain their Fleet uniforms. These were brighter in color than their original outfits, but at least they wouldn't advertize to even a casual observer that their wearers weren't bonafide officers. It was a simple matter for the Quarter Master to exchange the IDIC emblems for Command-Base insignia and make a few adjustments to accommodate their equipment belts. The canvas uniforms were disposed of in the ship's anti-matter pods to prevent detection.

Exactly on schedule, the Intrepid II established orbit around Star Fleet Headquarters, and was subjected to thorough scanning in compliance with the newly instituted anti-intruder procedures. The two extra passengers were not detected. They spent the scanning period seated in Meditation Room Three, (the Vulcan equivalent of a recreation room), clasping each other's hands, and with a barely discernable lump under the shoulder of Kirk's tunic. When Captain Selif finally arrived to escort them to the transporter room they rose in one motion, but he lifted his hand for them to wait.

"I have just received my new orders from the Command Base, and feel obligated to inform you of their content before you disembark. With this delivery of atypical Royventis cultures, I have depleted all plausible excuses to shuttle the Intrepid II between Sector L-37 and Star Fleet Command. Our next assignment will take us into the Cheron Sector for an indefinite period. Dr. T'Tarn has been in contact with the Surgeon General, who managed to communicate that she can quarter you at her private residence. You will, however, be left with no convenient way to leave the Base anytime in the foreseeable future."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other for a long moment. The prospect of being stranded in enemy territory was distinctly unappealing, but neither one of them wanted to back off now. At Spock's nod, the human answered for both of them. "Warning noted, Captain. However, since we've already made it this far, and since indications are that it will only become more difficult for us to do so in the future, it would be more logical for us to try to finish the job now."

"Understood," Selif said, not as though he approved or disapproved, simply acknowledging their decision. "The medical section reports their multi-walled container is ready for you."

Kirk and Spock followed Captain Selif to the main transporter room. The platform was dominated by a two by two-and-a-half meter box, marked with bright yellow crosses to warn of the supposedly dangerous content. Dr. T'Tarn and several of her staff were standing by with a rolling cart full of color-coded shipping racks, each one securely packed with small white vials. These, Kirk knew, were filled with rare-strain Royventis bacteria, specially isolated and cultured by T'Tarn so that the new Royventis vaccine could be tested on them. Since that vaccine was the Surgeon General's priority project, the experiments were to be carried out at the Command Base.

To insure safe transport of the bacteria, it was about to be sent down in a regulation pathogen-shipment container, with outer walls designed to solidify first and prevent any escape -- or any view -- of the contents. It was inside this box that the conspiracy leaders would be beamed down with culture vials stacked on every side of them to deceive the inevitable tricorder scan. Some natural revulsion at the idea of having deadly germs all around him must have shown in Kirk's expression, for the Vulcan physician assured him, "I personally oversaw the sealing of each of the cultures. They are all impregnable."

"I assume you will accompany us on the beam-down, Doctor?" It was Spock's inquiry.

"Affirmative. This shipment is scheduled for transfer to Isolation Room Number One. I shall be with you until then."

Kirk recalled that Star Fleet regulations required a doctor's supervision over the handling of dangerous medical substances.

T'Tarn continued. "Ms. Johansson has assured me that she or one of the conspirators on her staff will be dispatched to unpack the shipment. However, due the current plethora of projects occupying the medical division, you may not be attended to immediately. Therefore, I have prepared this breathing apparatus for you." One of the nurses came forward with two deceptively small compressed air tanks, each fitted with a flexible tube and a mouthpiece. "Keep your bodies wrapped around these while you are in the crate so that your Clems will hide them from any scanners. When you dispose of them, place them where they will be inconspicuous."

"Speaking of that point in time, Doctor, did Johansson mention how we're supposed to get to the Record's Department from Isolation Room One? I recall from your maps that the isolation area is rather far removed from the rest of the base facilities."

"She was unable to divulge that, Captain Kirk. We were forced to employ the two-meanings-at-once system of communication, which is unsuitable for transmitting detailed information. As the Surgeon General is a highly competent individual, it is logical to assume she has taken all aspects into consideration."

Logical indeed, considering what Uhura had told him about Dr. Sigrid Johansson -- she who applied the same ingenuity and thoroughness to conspiratorial matters as to medical research. Kirk was very much looking forward to meeting her.



A dignified round of thank-yous and farewells was performed. Kirk and Spock then climbed into the middle of the box, folding themselves into fetal positions around their air tanks. T'Tarn and her assistants proceeding to pack all the remaining space full of vial racks, even arranging them across the men's arched backs.

No one ever said this was going to be comfortable, Kirk reminded himself.

Finally the top was lowered, shutting out the remaining light and all but the vaguest suggestions of sound. Seconds later, the tingling sensation of the transporter beam enveloped them.

They materialized in solid darkness, and Jim breathed a sigh of relief that the multiple walls had fulfilled their purpose. Next came the scarce-heard whine of a tricorder, a momentary silence, and then soft thumpings on either end of the box as anti-gravs were attached. Finally, there were sensations of lift and forward movement -- all very smooth. T'Tarn must be admonishing the movers to be extremely careful how they carried that box.

After several minutes of steady, gentle movement, they were set down again; the last outside whispers died away and only the sounds of their own breathing remained in the blackness. Both men carefully brought the mouth pieces to their faces and activated the air tanks... and waited.

Every minute seemed longer than the last. The equipment in Kirk's belt started to press painfully into his stomach. He shifted several times, but the discomfort was only slightly relieved. Beside him, Spock was as still as a rock, probably in the Watching Trance, which Vulcan hunters had employed in ancient times, while waiting for game animals to appear at watering holes. Not for the first time, Jim wished that Spock could teach him some of those disciplines -- or at least his time sense. How long had they been waiting? More importantly, exactly how much air was left in the tanks... ?

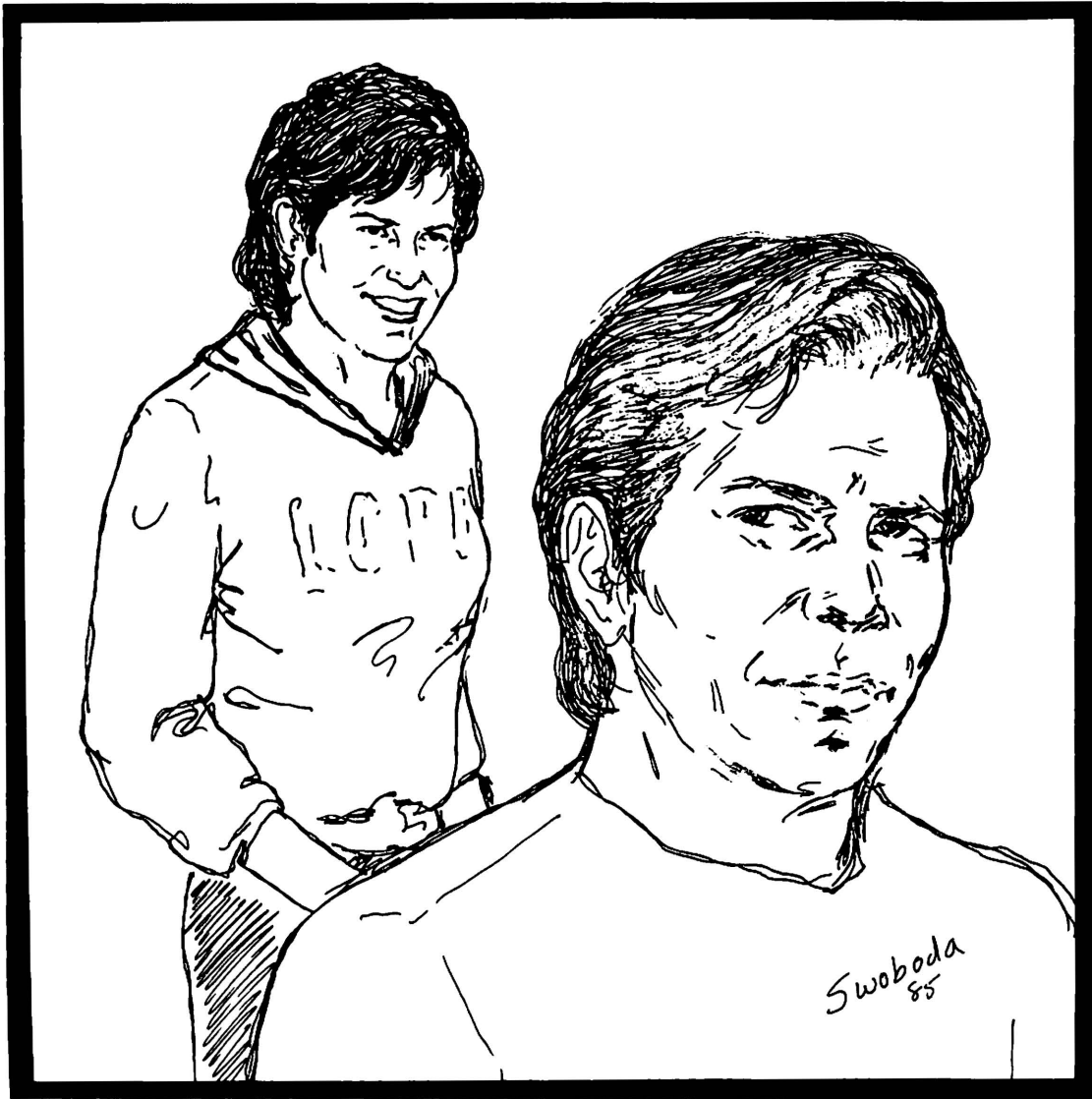
A scratching noise. No, it wasn't... yes, it was! Over their heads, the lid was being unfastened. Kirk felt Spock's body stiffen beside him even as his own muscles tensed, though he knew it was useless. If it were an enemy, they were in no position to offer any defense.

Dim light illuminated the pale vials. A clear voice above spoke one word: "Phoenix."

A conspirator -- but not Johannson; voice is too young. No Ursulian accent; probably not Dray, either. A new member, recruited since we left Eskar? How could Johannson ascertain in such a short time whether she can be trusted for such a mission? These thoughts flashed through Kirk's mind as he felt the last vial racks being lifted off his back. He at once lifted himself to a kneeling position and found himself confronting a slim girl with wavy, deep chocolate hair and a delighted smile. She put the racks on a nearby shelf, and clasped his hand warmly.

"Captain Kirk, I am so glad to finally meet you! I've been waiting so many years. You look just the way I pictured you!"





Jim returned the smile on pure reflex, but what he experienced could be described as uncertain recognition. He was certain he had never seen this woman before -- yet she was strikingly familiar, especially those expressive blue eyes, and that finely sculptured mouth, the slightest trace of Southern accent...

The adjacent vial racks were lifted from within, as Spock, too, rose to his knees. The woman, instantly becoming formal, nodded respectfully. "Captain Spock."

The Vulcan returned the nod. "Nurse McCoy."

"Mc... !" Jim suddenly knew why she was so familiar. "Joanna McCoy?"

"Yessir!" She seemed very pleased that he'd guessed. "You can't imagine how I've looked forward to this meeting, Mr. Kirk. Dad has told me so much about you."

"And I'm delighted to meet you." Jim glanced quizzically at Spock. "I take it you two already know each other?"

"Yes, we do! Didn't he tell? I joined the Enterprise medical staff for my first deep space internship after you were... after Ursula." Joanna's face became somber as she spoke the last words. Evidently she had inherited her father's proclivity for instantaneous mood-change.

Now assured of their unpacker's loyalties, Kirk took his first curious look around the room. Even with the bright lighting, it was hard to tell its size because of all the crates and hulking mechanical devices crowding the floorspace. "Are you certain it's safe to talk aloud in here, Joanna?"

"As safe as any place in Star Fleet Command. Most of the upper echelons are terrified of germs, so they don't bother to monitor the isolation rooms. Except for that, of course." She pointed out the yellow-lit sensor disk set in the middle of the ceiling. "But you won't have to worry about it as long as your Clem is working. Which reminds me, I've brought you some things to facilitate your break-in. You can get out of that box, if you want."

Moving as one, the conspiracy leaders climbed from the container, taking pains not to upset any of the racks.

Joanna's manner became professional as she opened a small crate on the floor and removed a large squeeze-bottle. "Hold out your hands, please." Kirk and Spock complied, and she squirted a generous dab of shiny grey paste onto each of their palms. "Now rub that all over your hands, and be especially careful to cover your fingertips." They did so, still standing shoulder to shoulder. The paste sank into their skins and dried, forming a tough, flexible coating. "It's a silicon sheath. We use this instead of surgical gloves for operations that require unimpeded digital dexterity. It should prevent you from leaving any skin oil on anything for the next several days.

"That should be more than enough time, thank you," Kirk replied, examining his slightly lustrous hands.

Joanna reached to the container again and pulled out a long strap attached to a metal hemisphere. It was less streamlined than the original but still recognizable as another Clem device.

"When Sigrid and Dray heard there might be two of you coming, they put this together for you. It may not be as reliable as the first one, but you might find it preferable to doing a Siamese-twin imitation throughout your stay."

"Agreed." Spock took the device and proceeded to fasten it against his shoulder.

"All that adjustment work wasted," grumbled Kirk.

"I would say not, Captain. It is always worthwhile to have a backup safety device." The Vulcan activated the unit and tugged his tunic back into place, and Jim, with some reluctance, stepped away from him for the first time.

"You'd better be careful no one sees you clearly. Anyone could tell you've got something under your shirt."

"If anyone gets close enough to notice, that will be the least of our problems," Spock remarked dryly.

Joanna next brought out four small anti-gravity 'gliding disks', of a type used to help maneuver bulky equipment through base corridors. These were equipped with fasteners so Kirk and Spock could attach them to their boots, and so be able to walk without producing a sound. "You people must have rearranged a lot of supply records to steal all this stuff," commented Kirk.

"Actually, no. It's from Ms. Johansson's private stores. She's been stockpiling it for over a year now. Though she hasn't said so, I think she's known all along you'd be trying something like this sooner or later. Better practice using those disks; walking without touching the floor takes some getting used to. And I'd better take care of my official business here before I go overtime." Joanna stepped to the transport box, and for the first time noticed the air tanks. "Uh-oh, we can't leave those in there! Any idiot could guess what they were used for."

"If there are any stores of respiratory equipment in this room, that should provide a sufficiently inconspicuous setting," Spock suggested.

"I believe there are. Lessee... that beige-colored box in the corner will do." Spock retrieved the tanks and moved toward the indicated container, wiping off the fingerprints as he went. Meanwhile, Joanna removed one Royventis vial from each of the racks, and crossed to the opposite side of the room. Kirk followed her.

"These things are all useful, Joanna, but what we really need is some method of getting closer to the Record's Department without being seen. Has Sigrid made any plans about that?"

"Of course, Captain. You will both be brought there this very evening, concealed by Ms. Moa."

Kirk frowned as he tried to place the name. "I don't recall any 'Moa' in the Phoenix Conspiracy."

"She's a new member. We converted her to our service yesterday." An amused glint showed in Joanna's eyes, but the flabbergasted Kirk was in no mood to appreciate it.

"Yesterday?! Miss McCoy, this is not a project to be entrusted to unknown qualities! Even if you could be certain of her loyalty, no raw recruit can... "

"She's not an unknown quality, Sir." Joanna leaned back against one of the big mechanical apparatuses, smiling coyly. "Say 'hello' to Ms. Moa."

It took a second for Kirk to understand. "You call this machine... ?"

"An acronym, Jim. The full name is Multi-Scan MicroOrganisms Analyzer," Spock explained as he came up beside his friend, eyeing the hulk appreciatively. "A highly efficient device, combining all the equipment needed for any standard bacteriological or viral study in a single unit. I was not aware that Star Fleet Command possessed one."

"They don't. This is the Surgeon General's personal property, brought here specifically for the Royventis study tonight. Isn't she beautiful?"

It was not the adjective Kirk would have chosen. To him, the machine looked very much like a legless robot horse, staring back over its shoulder. The main body was similar to a thick symmetrical coffin, covered with an incomprehensible expanse of gauges, switches and buttons. A thick vertical extension rose from one end of the coffin, from which a metal hood sprouted to hang parallel to the main body, directly below which was an opaque glass panel. Joanna pulled back the panel to reveal a row of small round orifices into which she inserted the Royventis vials.

"The microbacterium will need some time to spread out from their present ultra-concentrated state before we can test the vaccine on them," she explained conversationally.

When the last vial was in place she replaced the glass, locked it down and depressed a switch, which triggered a faint glow beneath the panel. "They'll be ready in about five hours. Sorry I can't be more precise, Mr. Spock.

"At that time a pair of workmen will come here to move Ms. Moa to the main medical laboratory, and you will be in here." She bent and tugged open the repair access on the machine's side, just below the 'neck'. The conspiracy leaders knelt to inspect the hiatus within, barely large enough to hold two grown men. "Dray and I spent most of yesterday taking out all the extraneous circuitry, and, of course, all transtaters. You'll be quite safe.

"Once you're inside, be sure to push this in back of the door." She reached within to pull a fitted wire-studded metal sheet across the access opening. "Then, press the switch on the other side to activate the wiring, and that should effectively discourage anyone from searching the interior with anything but a tricorder.

"Dray will accompany the movers to oversee the transfer. The route to the main medical lab passes within fifty meters of one of the Record's Department entrances, at which point one of the anti-grav disks under Ms. Moa will 'accidentally' slip out of place. While the movers are busy lifting the corner to replace the disk, you two will slide out of the machine and down

the adjacent corridor to Records. Chances are that the area will be completely clear. Records is closed to general usage after 1700 hours. And no one's going to hang around hallways that a Royventis shipment is about to come through."

Kirk was way ahead of her. "Then we'll use our equipment and the training Uhura gave us to get inside and into that file. Once we've secured it, we'll probably make it to the main laboratory without further help; it isn't terribly far from Records. And there will be Sigrid Johansson, placidly conducting Royventis vaccine experiments with her Ms. Moa unit."

"Just about perfect, Sir. Johansson, Dray, and myself, to be exact. As part of my medical training, I've been temporarily assigned to work under the Surgeon General. That's why I happen to be in Star Fleet Command. Very convenient timing, wouldn't you say? But be forewarned: nowadays the intercoms are always open in the labs. We'll try to bore the eavesdroppers into inattentiveness with a lot of unfathomable conversation, but be as quiet as possible once you're in the room."

"Acknowledged. So, we get back inside the Ms. Moa unit, and then?"

"Then, not to long afterward, when the more specialized tests have been done, Sigrid will take Ms. Moa home to her private laboratory, leaving the remainder of the study to be completed with the regular lab equipment. After all, Ms. Moa's a very valuable machine. It's natural for Johansson to feel protective about it," Joanna finished matter-of-factly.

"Quite understandable," Spock agreed in the same tone.

Jim smiled his approval. "Very neat planning. I just hope it actually works out that way."

"We all do, Captain." Joanna retrieved a clipboard from atop another crate. "I have to get back or they'll start wondering what's keeping me. See you again in a few hours. And don't worry about anything in this room; Sigrid removed all the contaminants three days ago."

With that, Joanna slipped around another mechanical hulk to the exit, produced her ID card to get through the first force field, and was automatically enveloped in a decontaminating ray. At the second field she paused just long enough to assume her 'Totally Professional' demeanor before passing through and vanishing from sight.

Left to themselves, Kirk and Spock returned to the crate and rearranged the moveable inner walls to make the interior look too small to hold anything but the vials. Next they acted on Joanna's suggestion and tried out the gliding disks. It was indeed a novel sensation to have each step halted a full five centimeters above the floor -- 'like having wings on one's feet', was Jim's whimsical comment. In less than an hour they had become fully accustomed to them, and turned to the problem of fitting into the Ms. Moa unit.

The repair access was conveniently wide, but the interior was no place for claustrophobics. After some experimenting they determined the most comfortable arrangement; Kirk, slightly shorter, would crouch in the space below the vertical section, while Spock curled up on the remaining floor area. They then practiced getting in and out of the unit, until they could do it in relative silence and in under eight seconds.

After that, there wasn't much to do but wait. Spock returned to the transport box and seated himself there, gathering his mental energies in preparation for the approaching trial. Kirk was too tense to sit still. He tried pacing, but found little relief in that because the room was too crowded to let him walk far. Eventually he decided that pacing would only make it difficult to hear anyone approaching the Isolation Room. After some thought, he moved to sit beside the Vulcan, pulled a couple of compact food bars from his belt, and handed on to Spock.

"Here. Neither of us can risk having our strength fail tonight."

Spock accepted the ration and they both ate without enthusiasm. As he took his last bite Kirk commented, "Y'know, Spock, it's occurred to me, now that we've got two Clems devices there's no need for us to keep together in the Records Department. I can go after that file alone, while you post yourself someplace where you can hear clearly if anyone comes in."

Spock nodded and finished off his own bar. "The exact center of the room would be best for that purpose."

"Might have known you'd already thought of it."

"It seemed the most productive use to make of our waiting time."

The human envied Spock his composure. His own tension was almost a physical ache. He wished Spock were in the mood for conversation, if only to distract him from his own thoughts -- mostly about all the extra security devices the Shield must have installed since Uhura was caught. "How much longer, Spock?"

"About two hours."

Jim regarded his friend with mild surprise. "It isn't like you to give approximations."

"I have only approximations to work with. Exactitude on non-medical matters has never been one of Ms. McCoy's virtues."

"Why didn't you ever mention she'd served aboard the Enterprise?"

Something haunted flickered in those deep-set eyes. "There was never any occasion to mention it. Those months between your conviction and the events at Roystadt are not a source of pleasant memories for me."



Jim leaned a little closer. "Did you dislike being in command so much?"

"It was not my changed rank that made the difference; it was my altered perception of Star Fleet. I had learned what they did to you, and all positive sense of purpose, of being involved with something worthwhile, was gone. We still performed the missions, but for me it had become an empty routine. I think all of our original crew felt the same way. Ensign Chekov tendered his resignation one month later. I made no attempt to talk him out of it."

Spock slipped back into his semi-trance and Kirk did not disturb him further. His own tension was somewhat diminished, displaced by deep sadness for all the lives the Rodinium Shield had blighted. Poor Chekov. No one was ever more gratified to make it into the service. What a waste!

Jim edged nearer to Spock, if only to assure himself that he was not alone. Seconds later, the Vulcan did the same thing, as though seeking the same comfort. Although very small thing, they gesture made Kirk feel better.

Much of the damage is not irreparable. Eliminating the Rodinium Shield will only be the first step; afterwards there'll be time to heal much of the harm they've done. I'll have to keep that in mind... later.



By the hall chronometer, it was 1917 at Star Fleet Command and more than eighty percent of the base personnel had left for the day. All hallway lighting had been dimmed, making the piercing yellow eyes of the sensor disks and the opaque-orange energy sheet across the Records Department entrance appear brighter. Anyone standing beside that threshold would have heard nothing except a soft electric purr and, from the Y-shaped intersection at the other end of the corridor, the sounds of a small group approaching.

Eventually the procession emerged from the right of the intersection. There were two stocky men in maintenance uniforms flanking a massive metallic bulk that floated ten centimeters from the floor. Behind them, warily watching all proceedings, strode a lean, milk-skinned Ursulian woman with long crimson hair.

When the movers reached the crossroads, they brought the big machine to a halt in order to rotate it toward the corridor on their right. Unnoticed by them, their overseer slid her foot under the bottom edge for just a second. The men braced themselves again, shoved their burden three meters forward... and jumped as the back right corner dipped to the floor with a resounding crash. They leaped clear, stared at the tilted hulk and the apparently astonished woman, and with tones sharpened by fear each accused the other of attaching 'that anti-grav' incorrectly. The Ursulian's melodic voice cut them short, assuring them that the cultures were too well-sealed for such a mild impact to breach them, and that it would be easy to replace the gliding disk. So saying, she bent to pluck a tiny brown object from where it

floated above the floor, and ordered the movers to pick up the affected corner. Calmer, they obediently knelt along the machine's right side and began to lift, grunting with effort.

Simultaneously, at the unit's diagonal corner, the repair access popped open and two figures slipped out; the first blue-shirted, the second clad in red. They gained their feet but remained crouched out of the maintenance crew's sight as they closed the compartment and poised for rapid movement. The woman could see them, but kept her attention on the slowly rising corner. As the machine leveled she stooped in front of the lifter's line of sight to slide the disk into place. At that instant the stowaways, moving with unnatural silence, darted into the right hallway and flattened themselves against the wall, once more out of view. The workmen announced mutual satisfaction with the disk's replacement, resumed their places at either side of the machine and proceeded down the corridor. The Ursulian followed as before, giving no sign that she had witnessed anything out of the ordinary.

The hidden figures waited until the procession's noises grew faint before crossing the remaining distance to the Records Department. There the darker man turned to stare keenly toward the intersection while the other pried open the rectangular control panel beside the forcefield. Kirk's hands moved swiftly, plucking bits of machinery from his waist and clamping them onto the exposed circuitry. He then tugged his companion's sleeve and they both took small white cards from their belts. The figure in blue pushed his card into the doorside slot and the shimmering energy sheath blinked off just long enough to let him step through the doorway.

The human inserted his card next, but did not enter. Taking a firm hold of his friend's wrist he leaned far back, moving his feet forward across the threshold. Now almost horizontal, he reached to the still-open controls. In one movement his hand snatched off the equipment and shut the panel; instantly the blue-clad arm yanked him inside. Both men vanished behind the reactivated orange energy sheet, and its contented humming was once again the only sound in the corridor.

The very filebank fabricades seemed to glower at their intrusion as Kirk and Spock made their way through the narrow passageways, heading for the middle of the complex. The whole charcoal grey-lit interior was like a highwalled metal maze, streaked with glimmering red wires that denoted active guard circuits. These, plus the omnipresent sensors, were at last report the only intrusion detection devices in this section, but it was probable that more were in use since the near-theft of the Dessrand file. Most likely, better and more numerous heat and motion sensors, since their surveillance was still regarded as most difficult to elude. Jim studied the ceiling uneasily and told himself that surely Johansson would have heard about it if anything so primitive as visual monitors had been installed.

They reached the room's center -- not marked as such but known from their exhaustive study of Records Department maps. Spock sank gracefully to one knee and lowered his head until his ear was within centimeters of the floor -- the zone where soundwaves traveled the furthest. Kirk paused long enough to mentally rehearse the route to the 'Dessrand section'. Just before

leaving he glanced back at the Vulcan, who lifted a thumb and forefinger, tips touching to form the ancient Terran symbol for 'good luck'. Jim gave him the same message, then started down the appropriate walkway.

The carefully memorized series of straightways and turns brought Kirk past more of the towering filebanks, each one containing more data than could be gathered in a hundred lifetimes. As part of his consciousness considered the sheer volume of information stored in this interior, McCoy's words from three years ago came back to him: "Uhura uncovered a certain piece of correspondence in the files, I don't know whether accidentally or deliberately." Kirk knew now that she had been looking for that sabotage order, the odds of chancing upon any one item in these files were about the same as picking one particular water drop out of an ocean. Uhura must have believed in Spock's innocence right from the start. She may have even arranged her own transfer to Star Fleet Command, for the specific purpose of looking for evidence to clear him.

The captain turned the final corner and faced his objective, an average sized monolith festooned with little yellow lights. The protrusion on the upper left corner -- a good three meters above Kirk's head -- marked the file drawer which his former communication's officer had been exploring when Commodore Vardakis had caught her. Now that he was actually confronting it, the notion that the Rodinium Shield had actually left that dangerous file in storage, even after their prisoner had escaped to parts unknown, seemed totally preposterous. And yet, the Phoenix Conspiracy had encountered other examples of Shield carelessness in very inappropriate places. It was a native disadvantage of being such a large, loose organization; too easy to assume somebody else was taking care of things.

Enough theorizing, James. Get up there and find out! he chided himself.

A railed surface skimming platform was parked on the filebank's base, but Kirk could not afford to use conventional methods. He removed the gliding disks from his boots and tucked them into a belt pouch, replaced them with 'gripping saucers' from another pouch, then found a hold on the monolith's corner and started up. His Star Fleet Academy education had included training in barehanded climbing, which he'd had ample opportunity to practice on the mezgain near Spock's Eskar home. That familiarity served him well as his fingers and feet sought out the narrow ridges and orifices on the cold metal fabricade.

In less than two minutes he gained the top and anchored himself to the upper edge with his left hand. His right hand worked on opening the file, deftly maneuvering the delicate tools Uhura had manufactured for him. It was a demanding task to perform so many intricate adjustments while maintaining a precarious hold on a vertical bank. He'd rehearsed this dozens of times on the file mock-ups aboard the Intrepid, but there an error would only set off a buzzer. Here, a slip could easily be fatal.

Opening the fabricade was simple compared to dealing with the interior. Several new alarm systems had been attached in addition to the already numerous guard circuits, and each had to be disconnected and/or rerouted

before the stored microtapes could even be touched. Even so, Jim felt his hope rise as he viewed the electronic jungle. There had to be something there that the Shield didn't want anyone to see!

With surety born of long practice, Kirk removed the protective units. When the last device was inert, he riffled through the exposed cassettes, seizing the one with the correct date. He pushed it into the miniaturized tapeplayer on his belt, lifted the whole thing up to where he could read it. A half-minute's scrutiny was all he needed.

Thank God for over-confidence in machinery!

He transferred the tape in a special compartment on his chest strap, right beside the Clems, then swiftly retrieved all his equipment and returned it to his belt. When the last item had been removed and the fabricade looked normal again, he descended the filebank. It took longer than the upward climb because his limbs were stiff from holding the same position for so long. Upon reaching the floor, he slipped the gliding disks back onto his boots and started back the way he'd come, his mind going over the direction in reverse. So, the first turn will be...

An arm snaked out of the corridor on his right, caught his and jerked him in. Driven by sudden terror, Kirk swung a powerful blow at his assailant -- who deflected it effortlessly. He only then saw it was Spock. The Vulcan gave him no time for chagrin, but pulled him closer, placing a hand against Jim's temple and implanting a single sentence:

//Two large groups of base personnel have just entered this complex from both sides at once.//

Even as the human's stomach went cold, Spock broke away and sprinted like a gazelle to the further end of the passageway. Kirk followed, trusting his life to his friend's hearing. Their only hope of avoiding capture lay in Spock's ability to keep track of all their pursuers at once.

From there, Spock beckoned the human on, moving fast through a seemingly random series of turns until Kirk had lost all sense of where they were. Spock, with his textbook-perfect memory, still knew -- not that such information would do them much good if the searchers followed their training. Kirk was all too familiar with the Security practice of forming themselves into lines along either end of a closed search area, then sending the lines toward each other in patterns calculated to sweep every walkway and catch any fugitive between them.

Spock paused repeatedly to crouch near the floor, listening for a gap in that formation. No such breach occurred, however, so the saboteurs were forced to continue their erratic course, until the maze of monoliths suddenly gave way to a single, long row of large computers, their indicator panels glowing pale blue and green. The Vulcan knelt again while Kirk fought to control his harsh breathing. At least he now knew where they were: the Research Area, against the wall perpendicular to and a hundred meters from the entrance.

Spock turned his head rapidly from side to side, and Jim knew, with sickening assurance, that they must be hemmed in. He drew his dart gun, but suddenly realized how useless it was in this situation. The noise of firing would announce their location as effectively as a security guard's outcry. His eyes glanced about, seeking any other alternative... and stopped on the outline of a door in the side of one of the computers. Another repair access.

His common sense promptly objected. Computers that size were high-wattage; entering one with its power on -- as these obvious were -- was superlatively dangerous. But so was their present position. Spock came back up, his expression hinting that of a trapped animal, and Kirk decided they were out of options. He touched the Vulcan's arm, pointed out the narrow door, watched the same conflicting considerations flash through his friends' eyes and knew intuitively that he had made the same decision.

The closure was a protruding latch with a simple lock fastening; it took Spock only a moment to pry it off, standing close to muffle the sound. Even as he did, he shot a glance over his shoulder and Kirk didn't have to wonder what had provoked that look. Even he could hear someone in an adjacent corridor, stealthily moving nearer.

The Vulcan eased the access open and gestured for Jim to get in first. The human obeyed, keeping his body flat against the outer wall to avoid the ominously glowing bank of power conductors. Spock slid in beside him and closed the door.

The interior was silent, allowing them both to hear the movements of the approaching guard. Once he came alongside their computer, how could he fail to notice the damaged latch? Jim wet his lips as he eyed the bright tubes, mere centimeters from their chests. Touching one would kill in seconds -- probably preferable to being taken prisoner, as Spock would undoubtedly agree.

Guilt assaulted the human. It must have been his error that alerted Security. He must have removed the rerouters from the alarms too quickly and set one of them off, and now his carelessness might well force both of them to suicide. Anguished, he turned his head toward Spock... and, for the first time, noticed his friend's state of intense concentration. The Vulcan's eyes were shut, his facial muscles clenched in the multicolor glare, while one palm pressed hard against the wall beside him. Projection, Jim realized with a new surge of hope.

The searcher was almost beside their hiding place when he suddenly stopped, as though caught in an invisible web. Spock trembled with effort, his brow glittering with perspiration. Kirk ground his teeth in frustration because he couldn't help. Through it, he heard the slight sound of a communicator channel being opened.

"Eelic to Sub-Admiral Lynd. Research Area is clear, sir." The mature male voice was almost dreamlike, making the machine-filtered answer sound rough by comparison.

"Noted. Rendezvous with Cartwright at checkpoint G-11 and proceed from there."

"Yessir." The communicator snapped shut and the footsteps moved away until they faded from hearing. Spock almost gasped as the mind-touch was sundered. For a heart-stopping instant he looked as though he were about to slump forward into the circuitry, but recovered himself. For over a minute he just stood, breathing hard, while Kirk kept a firm hold on his elbow. Finally Spock nodded that he was all right. Kirk gave his arm an encouraging squeeze. 'Time we moved on,' he mouthed.

The last leg of the journey was the easiest, once Spock determined the security sweep was no longer between them and the entrance. Not until they had reached the last corner did the Vulcan gesture for another halt. The exit was just beyond, and he heard the heartbeat of the guard posted there. Once again, Spock positioned himself for a projection -- hand extended and head bowed. Jim Kirk watched with no slight anxiety. Successfully achieving one projection had been an acute strain. To attempt another so soon afterwards would be worse than arduous; it could take everything Spock had to...

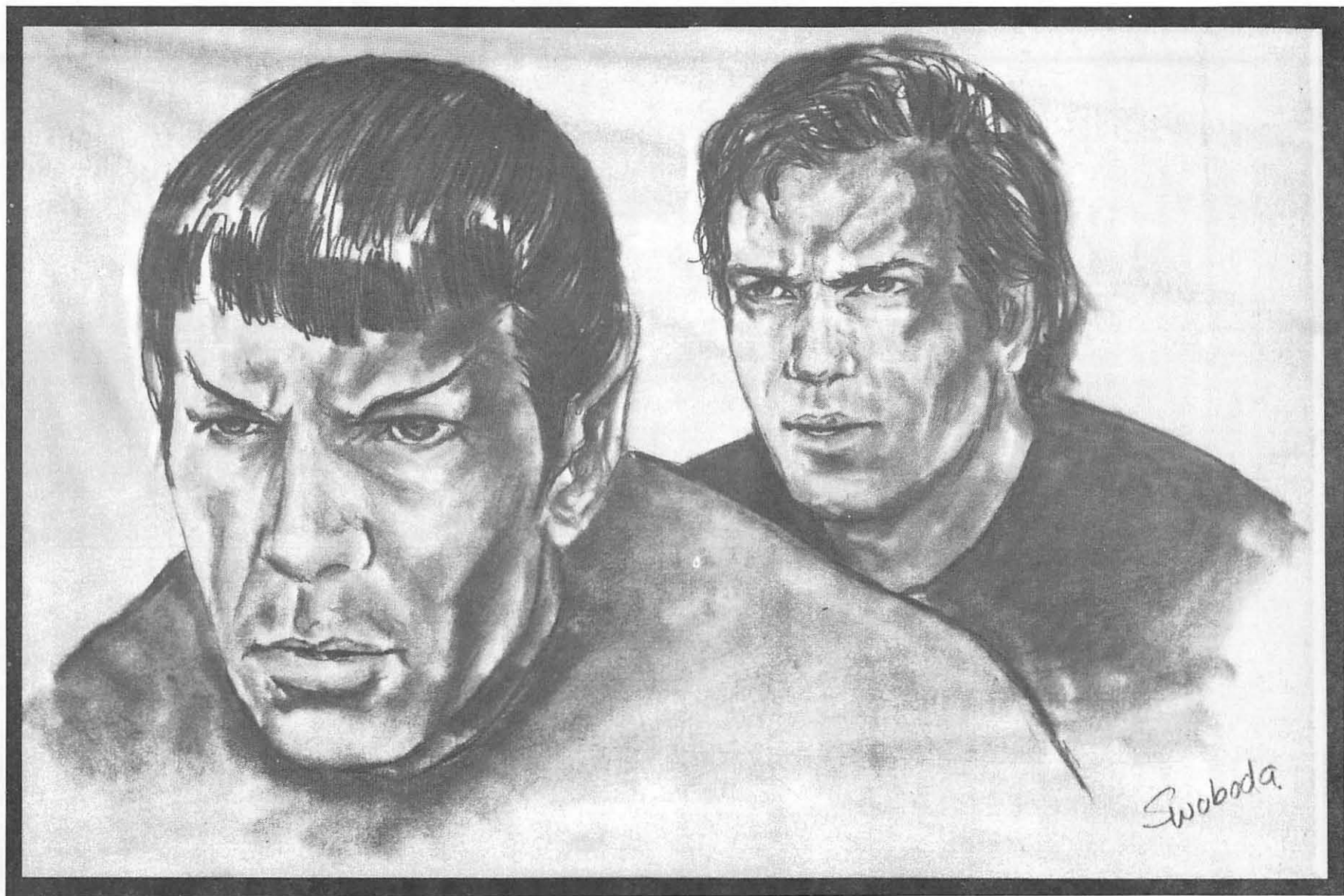
The Vulcan's free hand jerked purposefully at his side -- all the effort he could spare to signal his companion. Kirk stepped around the corner and found himself confronting a muscular Andorian who stared rigidly at nothing. The human considered knocking him out, but that would inform Security that their quarry had escaped from the Records Department. Better to let them waste time searching the whole complex.

Kirk wrenched the inner control panel open and fastened on a rerouter to prevent the interruption in the energy field's flow from showing up on any monitor, then a jammer to block the recording of their ID numbers. He yanked his own card from his belt as he sped back to the corner to retrieve Spock. He palmed the Vulcan's ID pass, and guided his friend to the threshold.

Spock was hunched over, his whole face like a tight fist, blindly moving wherever the human's hands directed him. A slight noise far behind them made Kirk's viscera jump, but he dared not look back. Hastily he inserted Spock's card into the slot, spared one glance down the empty hall, and pushed Spock through the doorway. Then he exchanged the slotted cards and, this time with only the jamb for an anchor, positioned himself over the threshold like a limbo dancer to snatch back his telltale gadgets.

Another sound from slightly closer reached his ears even as he twisted violently, flinging himself into the outside corridor and against the wall beside Spock. The Vulcan was leaning heavily against the doorside, hands over his face as he fought to withdraw his mind gradually, to prevent the Andorian from knowing what had happened. Ten agonizing seconds later Spock emitted a barely audible moan and fell against his friend's chest. Kirk clutched him with one arm, his other hand holding the dart gun at ready. Spock's fatigue was no momentary weakness; those two projections had drained him like a punctured bucket. For nearly a minute all Kirk could do was stand, supporting Spock, his eyes shifting from one end of the hall to the other, grimly prepared to fire at anything that moved.





But even in his semiconscious state, the Vulcan was aware of their danger. Summoning his last reserve, he forced himself to stand erect and whispered, "Jim, it is imperative that we proceed to the Medical Lab with all possible speed."

Kirk, tho suspicious of his companion's sudden recovery, had to accept it at face value; the statement was irrefutable. He shifted his hold to Spock's upper arm and they vacated the corridor, turning left at the first intersection.

From then on only routine listen-and-dodge tactics were needed. An abnormal number of guards were patrolling the hallways, which was to be expected during an Intruder Alert, but Kirk and Spock knew enough about security methods to get past them with little difficulty, at least at first. As Spock's exhaustion began asserting itself, the Vulcan became progressively slow and clumsy. By the time the medical lab was within sight, Kirk read signs of imminent collapse -- the slumped shoulders, bowed head, eyes glazed and only partially focused. Jim got Spock's arm around his shoulders, slipped his own around the Vulcan's waist and virtually dragging him to the wide laboratory door. The entry was completely open, except for the translucent blue sterilizing field. There, caution made Kirk pause and listen. He could hear several feminine voices within, all bantering medical jargon. One sounded Ursulian, another - yes! - was certainly Joanna McCoy's. If only he could be certain the third one was...

"Pursuers," Spock hissed, directly into the human's ear. Having no further choice, they both plunged into the lab and flattened themselves against the wall beside the door. Kirk received an ephemeral impression of a vast pale interior, whirring and sparkling with any amount of high-tech gadgetry, but his focused attention was on the three humanoid figures -- brunette, blond and fire-haired -- grouped behind a long enamel counter several meters further into the room. He recognized Joanna and Dray at once, and so tentatively identified the older blond between them as the Surgeon General, though he had not expected her to be so small.

The women had undoubtedly noticed their visitors, but none of them looked at Kirk and Spock directly, nor interrupted their handling of the various containers and equipment on the counter. Another security detail marched past the entrance, and their noises did not die out completely, for guards were now traversing the halls at frequent intervals. Evidently, Security had just determined the fugitives were not in the Records Section, and was expanding the search into adjoining areas. It was only a matter of time before one of the guards came to inspect the lab itself.

Johannson was making a circular motion with one hand -- seemingly to emphasize a point of discussion, actually gesturing for Kirk and Spock to move behind the counter. Jim measured the distance with his eyes; five meters to cross in full view of the corridor where traffic was beginning to resemble that of an angry anthill. And Spock was in no condition to move fast. Kirk studied his companion, who was attempting to gather himself for the dash, but looked more as if he were about to faint. His hearing was unimpaired, however, and Jim could see him straining to find an adequate interval between the sounds of the passerbys.

If he were to pass out in the middle of the stretch...

Spock nodded sharply. Up to that instant Kirk hadn't known what he was going to do but, at that signal, he scooped the Vulcan off his feet, darted across the open space and ducked in back of the counter. There, beside the women's legs, was the wide open repair access of the gleaming Ms. Moa unit. Kirk wondered how he could ever have thought the machine ugly.

As Jim set him down, Spock's weakness afforded no display of embarrassment, just relief. Sigrid bent low over the machine to remove a centrifuge vial, her expression lined with concern. She mouthed the words, 'What's wrong with him?'

'Exhaustion,' the human responded in kind, just before his head disappeared into the machine. Kirk knew he had to enter first if they were to both fit inside, but he left Spock behind with some reluctance. Irrational, of course. Sigrid and Company would provide Spock with whatever assistance he needed.

Kirk watched the Vulcan crawl into the compartment, slowly, but unaided, while the medical team covered the sounds with yet more esoteric conversation. Apparently Spock was determined to finish this adventure alone.

"Now, Ms. McCoy, can you explain the significance of this supernatant's colloid state?"

"I think so. The abundance of suspended solids is indicative of accelerated metabolic activity among the bacterium, indicating that..."

Spock pulled his long legs inside and closed the access. Dutifully, he pushed the wired sheet into place and activated it, then went limp. Jim snaked one hand down to touch the Vulcan's throat. The pulse was steady, the breathing slow. Spock was asleep.

The captain would have sighed, if there'd been room for it, glad that at least his friend could rest. He himself could never relax when he felt helpless, as he did now, and with their safety resting solely in someone else's hands.

Sigrid Johansson pressed the toe of her boot against the access door, just to make sure it was fastened shut. With the Conspiracy leaders securely hidden inside the multi-scanner, nine-tenths of the evening's tension drained from her and she set about completing the Royventis tests with renewed spirit. The increasing activity in the formerly soundless hallway proved to be a distraction however, and Johansson frowned at the human flow with real annoyance. "What in Shapley's name is going on out there? Don't people know it's after hours?"

Dray put into words what they all suspected. "It is likely that some kind of disturbance has occurred on the Base, and Security has been called to investigate. Perhaps it would be prudent for us to determine..."

She was interrupted by the sudden entrance of a formidable-looking security woman. "Commander Marya Blagoy reporting to watch-post, General Johannson," she announced briskly. "Have you or your subordinates observed anything unusual around here lately?"

The medical personnel exchanged blank looks before Sigrid set down a pair of vials and folded her arms. "Nothing unexpected, except some unseasonably heavy traffic, and your own arrival. Might I inquire what you've been sent to watch for?"

"Espionage agents with stolen Star Fleet documents, Ma'am. Didn't you hear the Intruder Alert klaxon?"

"I don't allow audial alarms in this lab. Sudden noises and people handling pathogens is a dangerous mix," Johannson explained, but no longer sounded so self-assured. "Do you mean there could be a spy loose in this area right now?"

"Strongly indicated, General. That's why I'm here." The iron-haired woman struck a dramatic watching pose beside the doorway. "They burglarized Records only a little while ago. Lynd's not positive they aren't still in there, but he's taking no chances. Anyone crazy enough to commit espionage on this Base might do something desperate to get out again, so he's posting guards over all personnel present."

Dray's irises were pulsating with Ursulian nervousness. "I thought Security was using extra precautions in Records, ever since that..."

"We did," Blagoy snapped. "Bastard just knew his stuff, inside and out. It must have been a trained Records Officer... maybe the same little Bantu spy who slipped out of Komack's claws a couple months ago. Not that that took any special smarts." Her contempt for the Admiral showed plainly as her ice-blue eyes swept the hall. "But it's not going to happen this time!"

Sigrid, apparently satisfied with the promise, asked Joanna to hand her the last set of cultures. The girl's hands shook slightly as she complied. "Do you really think it's safe for us to stay here, General?"

"Course it's safe." Blagoy hefted her phaser. "If that spy comes anywhere near here, I'll make 'em wish they'd taken up rock collecting instead. You ladies go back to your germs."

Sigrid patted her trainees' arm. "She's right, Joanna. Dray and I were on Base during the last Alert and nothing happened to us. We've got the best Security people in the Federation here." She gave her proteges what looked like a soothing smile, but was really a congratulatory grin. Blagoy obviously relished the role of Protector of Helpless Non-Combatives, and would not be thinking of them as anything else.

The three resumed their work, but continued to send uneasy glances toward the hall, much to the Commander's gratification. Four different searchers stopped by with tricorders, and each time Blagoy let them scan the

room, then urged them to move on the where they were needed. About half an hour later Joanna announced with heartfelt relief that the results from the final tests were complete.

"Good. Feed them into the computer and mark it for tomorrow's study. Dray, help me get these specimens into the vault."

When everything was in order, the three of them jacked up Ms. Moa, reattached the gliding disks, and pulled the machine to the door.

Johannson hesitated at the threshold, glancing apprehensively up and down the corridor. "They haven't located the intruder yet?"

"'Fraid not." Blagoy regarded the researchers pityingly. "Would you like me to escort you to the transporter, General?"

"We would appreciate that very much, Commander. But, are you allowed to leave your post?"

"My post is wherever there are Star Fleet personnel to protect. I'll call one of my underlings here to watch this spot."

After a brief conversation on the communicator, and a slightly longer wait for the replacement to arrive, the group started off. Dray, Joanna and Sigrid pushed the machine while Blagoy walked ahead of them, phaser drawn. Posted guards started toward them from every intersection, but withdrew as soon as they recognized the commander. Not until they sighted the transporter room did Blagoy drop back.

"Okay, you three'll be safe from here on. Commodore Massey and a couple of his better kids are stationed in there. Any spy'd be stupid to get anywhere near him. I'll be returning to the lab now." She strode away down the hall.

Johannson assumed the forward position as they approached the door, reflecting on the validity of Blagoy's words. She knew Robert Massey -- a decent man, but stubbornly dedicated to the responsibilities of his position -- they couldn't count on him to look the other way for them. And his reputation as an exceptionally observant Head-of-Security, unlike many reputations in Star Fleet Command, was well deserved ('Six-eyes Massey' -- his nickname within his own section.) Luckily, Sigrid, perhaps alone among all the people on this Base, knew of one method which might serve to dilute his attention. Somewhat disreputable, but we're living in Desperate Times. She sent a meaningful look back at Dray and McCoy, as though to say, 'Don't be surprised by anything I do.'

As she stepped through the door, three phasers swung on her. She jumped back, one hand leaping to her throat. Two of the weapons dropped. The third stayed level until an angry Massey barked, "Whasa matter with you, Moreno? Don't you recognize the Surgeon General?"

The dark young guard stiffened with chagrin as he holstered his phaser. Commodore Massey, a gruff-looking, well-conditioned sexagenarian, became soliticious as he looked to Sigrid. "My apologies for startling you, Ms. Johannson.

"I'm fine. This Intruder Alert has me a bit on edge, that's all," Sigrid assured, swiftly reassembling her composure. She then instructed her calming subordinates to bring Ms. Moa inside. Massey quirked a peppered eyebrow as it was pushed into the room.

"Taking it home already? Did you finish your vaccine research?"

"No, just the parts that absolutely require the multi-scanner. I don't want to leave it here and give some wet-eared technician a chance to grow molds in it again." A painful expression crossed her face at that memory. Massey, who abhorred the misuse of fine equipment, nodded understanding, but the lanky, red-headed trainee on his left frowned at the metallic hulk.

"Commodore, that machine is big enough to conceal a humanoid. Regulations demand that it be searched before it's put on the transporter."

"Then do so, Carossa."

The women stepped out of the way as Carossa circled Ms. Moa, examining it with distrustful eyes. When he spotted the repair access his face came to life, like a tracking hound when it finally sites the quarry, and he swooped down to fling it open.

Johannson's eyes widened. "Lieutenant, I wouldn't... "

Too late. The youngster reached within and there was an electric crack, followed by a yell as Carossa snatched back his smoking hand. A disgusted-looking Massey strode over to his errant subordinate, who was emitting a string of expletives, and regarded him without a trace of sympathy. "What are you using for brains, Carossa? You don't search machine interiors with your hands, you use this."

The lieutenant winced as the Commodore thrust a tricorder into his burnt fingers, but began sullenly scanning Ms. Moa. Johannson looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I am sorry about that. I should have warned you beforehand about all those exposed circuits."

"The kid's got to learn, and there's nothing like a little pain to make a lesson stick." Then, least she think him harsh, Massey added, "I took my hard knocks, too, when I was his age. 'Hain't fun, but there's no better way to make a good Security Officer."

Carossa shut off the scanner. "All clear, Sir," he announced, as insolently as he dared.

"Okay. Get to the aid station now and have that burn treated. Moreno, help the ladies get their machine onto the platform."



With four of them working at it, it didn't take long to position Ms. Moa at the back of the chamber. Joanna, Dray and the Surgeon General lined up in front of it as Massey took his place at the transporter controls. "Sure you won't need any assistance getting that monster into your carrier, Ms. Johansson?"

She smiled appreciatively. "It's not such a monster. We'll be able to handle it from here." A trace of worry touched her face. "Are they certain the flyer lot is safe, Massey? If they don't even know who the intruder is this time..."

The Commodore used his most professionally reassuring tones. "We do know he hasn't got out of the building, and I can unconditionally guarantee, he's not getting out through this transporter. There's no way I'd let anything happen to my favorite little lady."

Moreno stared bug-eyed at his commanding officer, but Johansson looked shyly pleased. "Thank you, Robert."

Something close to a beautiful grin spread across Massey's face. "You're quite welcome, Sigrid." The glow stayed with him as he set the coordinates, delighted to have finally thawed Johansson's strictly, business-like attitude toward him. Johansson, whom he considered the most attractive woman in his age group on this or any other Base. He had to concede that the change was probably due to her momentary perception of him as a protective force against an unknown peril. Still, perhaps enough of that positive feeling would remain for her to decide she liked him, too, the next time she saw him.

He failed to notice Moreno's incredulous gaze upon him, or the bemused expressions on Joanna and Dray as he pulled the levers. All he was aware of, even after they had disintegrated to sparkles and faded away, were those lovely platinum eyes smiling at him...



One thing about hiding out in the Surgeon General's home, Kirk decided. It certainly encouraged indulgence in the more romantic aspects of being a 'fugitive from the law.'

Sigrid Johansson had two private passions in life: the Phoenix Conspiracy, and horticulture. To further the latter interest, she had long ago converted half of her abode into a state-of-the-art plant museum -- one huge interior, which she whimsically called her 'living room', filled to capacity with foliage from a score of different planets. Spreading, delicate Spicam lace-trees, scarlet Ursulian flame bushes, iridescent green-blue Elasian jewel vines, purple Rigelian water-spears in a black stone basin, Terrestrial coconut palms festooned with epiphyte cattleya orchids, and dozens of other plants Jim couldn't identify, combined to create a dizzyingly colorful jungle under the noon-day sun. It was somewhere in here, Johansson had hinted, that her own bundle of Conspiracy papers was concealed. Kirk could scarcely imagine a better hiding place for them, or for Spock and himself. The room's ceiling and three of the walls were transparent from the inside, offering an

unobstructed view of all the roadways leading to the house. If anyone came along unexpectedly, they would know it in time to conceal themselves from any visual search. But although Kirk knew these clear walls were actually Monophoto panes, which from the outside appeared to be opaque black, he found their illusion of openness disconcerting, so preferred to stay near the room's center.

Spock, who was not troubled by any such irrational fear, was presently at the left corner of the greenhouse, examining plants, just as he had been since waking. Ten hour's sleep had been sufficient to let him recover from yesterday's ordeal. After six years of nothing but Eskarian flora to study he probably found all this stimuli to his scientific curiosity irresistible, Kirk considered affectionately. The thought was interrupted as a low-altitude flyer skimmed by, just beyond Spock's back, and the human started despite himself.

"Say, Spock?" The Vulcan glanced up from a clump of blue Polarian plume-grass. "Do you think you could find something to look at over here?"

Predictably, the Vulcan was uncomprehending. "For what purpose?"

"To humor me. I know it's not logical, but I'd feel more comfortable if you weren't so close to the edge of the room. I keep thinking that someone's going to see you.

Spock looked over his shoulder at the seemingly nonexistent partition. Understanding the human's unease, if not his rationality, he obligingly started toward the center of the room along one of the grey-tiled walkways. He was only half way there, however, when he halted, staring with raised brows at something beside the path. Curious about what single object could have so captured attention in this botanical menagerie, Kirk strode over to have a look. En route, a vague gingerbread odor among all the other smells suggested the answer. Sure enough, when he drew up beside Spock, there stood a medium-sized skaykoth, conspicuous for its familiarity amidst all the exotica. The effect was like a photograph of a well-known piece of furniture pasted onto a Rousseau painting.

"Hmmm. Sigrid'd better cut it back before it comes to spore or she'll have them growing all over the room," Jim remarked, recalling his own experience with the hemlock grove on Eskar.

Spock eyed the swollen bulbs crowning the massive stem, only a couple weeks away from splitting open. "We'll probably have the chance to do it ourselves, Jim."

The captain pursed his lips at this depressing reminder, that the two of them were stranded on this Base, not knowing when they'd have any method of getting off, or even if they should.

It was so frustrating. Here they were, with all the evidence necessary to destroy the Rodinium Shield, and they had only now realized their lack of any way to reveal it. The most obvious course of action was to have Johansson bring it to the office of some upper echelon, but which one? Who could they be certain was not a Shield-bearer, or else so afraid of the

Shield's power that, under the guise of aiding them, they'd arrange to have the evidence destroyed? A much safer plan was to bring everything before a group of officials, preferably from several Federation worlds as well as from Star Fleet, but arranging such a gathering for no specified reason would be guaranteed to draw the Shield's special attention, and at the moment Sigrid lacked any convincing excuse to call one. In their present state of Full Alert, the simple circumstance of important people being called together so soon after the file theft would be alarming enough for the Admirals to refuse permission for the meeting, and they would take note of who had asked for it. Sigrid would have to wait for an opening, and, in the meanwhile, perpetrate no remotely unusual behavior. Despite the danger of being discovered, Kirk and Spock were going to have to remain concealed in her home for an indeterminant period.

Still staring at the lonely skaykoth, so reminiscent of less precarious days on Eskar, Kirk found himself experiencing one of his odd moments of complete objectivity. For a few seconds he was viewing his life situation as though from the outside, scarcely believing what he saw.

"Spock, how the hell did we ever get into this mess?"

The Vulcan apparently didn't know the question was supposed to be rhetorical. "You know as well as I, Jim. You made an unavoidable decision to swerve and avoid colliding with a passenger vessel. And I, perhaps unnecessarily, made a decision to destroy the Enterprise."

Kirk's head snapped around. "What do you mean, 'perhaps unnecessarily'?"

Spock's eyes and voice were distant. "There was a chance -- one in a thousand, but a chance -- that I could have saved her."

"Ah, yes, I remember you saying that once before, but you never did explain what you meant."

Spock seemed to come back to the present. He regarded Kirk searchingly for a few seconds, and then sagged resignfully, as though the secret was too heavy a burden to carry any longer.

"The sabotage had been committed in the Engineering hull. I could have disengaged that section from the primary hull, instead of blowing up the entire ship. At the time, I considered that alternative too dangerous, because the saucer's impulse engines had also been damaged in the battle, and without the engineering facilities there was no chance of our repairing them. We would have been left drifting through the Roystadt system with no defense. Then, if the Klingons found us, I would have been obligated to destroy the saucer anyway, with all hands aboard. However, had I taken the risk, it's possible a Federation starship might have located us first, and towed us to a repair base."

Kirk's jaw had dropped in amazement. "You mean to say you actually considered that?! Floating around a Klingon-occupied sector without any power? Spock, even by human standards that would have been totally illogical."

"So I acknowledge," Spock answered pensively. "It's indefensible, it makes no sense from either a Vulcan or human viewpoint, but nonetheless it... disturbs me, that I shall never know what would have happened if I had taken the chance."

Jim could only shake his head ruefully. The admission had given him an inkling of what Spock had gone through after making that decision: replaying the events over and over again in his mind, picking apart every moment, racking his brain in a tormented effort to find out if there was any other course of action for which he might have opted. And finally he had come up with one. Irrational guilt was not unique to humans, after all.

"Well, I know what would have happened, Spock. If you had gone for that one-in-a-thousand chance, and if by some miracle it had paid off, the Rodinium Shield would have pulled another sabotage on you -- maybe one which wouldn't have left you even that much of an option."

"Or: the subsequent investigation of the incident might have revealed the sabotage, the perpetrators might have been exposed and punished, and the Enterprise would be in service today."

The image wrenched Kirk's gut. His lovely silver lady, still alive and well, still soaring her trackless ways among the stars...

It lasted only an instant, subverted by the here-and-now need of his friend. And he knew how to answer him. Jim placed a warming arm across the Vulcan's back.

"Spock, you've got to believe that this is the absolute truth: if things had happened that way... I suppose I wouldn't be unhappy the Enterprise had survived, but, much more than that, I don't think I could have forgiven you, for taking that kind of risk with over four hundred lives. It would've told me you weren't the kind of man I'd thought you were -- and certainly nobody I'd want to call 'Friend'. You would have saved the ship, and lost me."

By now, Spock was staring at him intently. Kirk stared right back, determined to convince Spock he really meant it. "From the viewpoint of anyone who values other lives, you had no more choice at Roystadt than I had at Ursula. And no more excuse for blaming yourself. If you accept my decision, then you must accept your own."

The Vulcan swallowed slowly. "I shall endeavor to do so, Jim."

Kirk smiled, and hooked his elbow playfully around Spock's neck. "I'm sure you'll succeed. It's purely logical, after all."

Happy to have that matter put to rest, the human retrieved his arm and looked about the room for a less provocative subject of conversation. He noticed a large, almost pure white spike flower, closely encircled by minute crimson vines. In a rare moment of whimsey, Kirk bent close to the plant and sniffed it, then displayed an exaggerated look of disappointment.

"The odor's something like overripe banana skins."

"What were you expecting?" Spock inquired, moving to his side.

"I thought it might smell of peppermint."

The Vulcan looked over the entwined plants with frank bewilderment. "Jim, I cannot discern the vaguest resemblance to Mentha piperita."

"I meant that it looks like a candy-cane. Don't you know about those?" Kirk was beginning to feel foolish, for it was obvious Spock did not know. "That's a traditional treat, hundreds of years old, that many human children are given for Christmas. It's a mint-flavored stick of candy with red and white stripes, like the plant's. Didn't you ever have one of those when you were a kid?"

"Vulcan children are generally discouraged from developing any taste for such confections. The nutritional deficit is considered..."

"Oh, never mind. It was supposed to be a joke. I keep forgetting that Vulcans don't have a sense of humor."

"Nor any tooth decay," Spock responded dryly.

Kirk pretended to be put out. Actually, he was relieved to have rescued Spock from the gloom of their previous conversation. The Vulcan, never suspecting the ploy, still had his attention fixed on the plants.

"As to the striped configuration, what you are actually looking at is the physiological union of two separate species: the Sergolan moon flower and the Tashmor blood vine of Beta Three. Millennium ago, the vine was a parasite on the Sergolan, drawing most of its carbohydrate supply from the plant it encircled, as do certain members of the Convolvaceae family on Earth. Since the vine also has a very extensive root system, its presence inadvertently gave the host plant protection against being washed away in the violent rainstorms that Beta Three is so famous for. In other words, it enhanced the Sergolan's chances of surviving to reproductive age. So, it became of selective advantage for the spike flower to play host to the Tashmor. The relationship evolved into a mutualistic one, with both species benefiting. By now the arrangement has become obligate -- neither plant can survive without the other. They are even becoming physiologically interdependent, and so, most probably, shall eventually evolve into a single organism.

"Is that really possible?"

"Irrefutably. Symbiosis and evolved interdependence are nearly universal trends among living things. For example, the mitochondria organelles, which are responsible for energy production within each of our own cells, are believed to originally have been free-living bacteria."

"That's interesting." Somewhat to his own surprise, Jim found that it really was. He had always felt he ought to learn a little more about the natural sciences, but his education at the Academy had been, of necessity,

concentrated on military matters. After entering the fleet, he had never seemed to have time for extensive scientific reading. But now that they had nothing else to do before Sigrid came home, it would be a good way to pass the time. At the least it might give him a better appreciation of the scenery.

"Are there any other... what'd you call them... symbiotic relationships at work here, Spock?"

"Many." The Vulcan pointed out a twisted ebony shrub, with what looked like fringes of ivory-colored feathers growing from the undersides of each of its branches. "What we see here is an example of a commensal relationship -- beneficial to the smaller plant; which gains a platform from which to hang its flowers for pollination, but neither helpful nor harmful to the supporting bush. A situation like this could possibly evolve into either a parasitic or mutualistic one, depending on whether either participant gains the ability to take anything more from the other, or the ability to give, for its own benefit..."

And so Spock slowly made his way along the path, lecturing about each plant-species along the way, while Kirk followed, listening attentively. Despite an unfamiliarity with much of the terminology, he found the gist of the talk fascinating, and so they spent a quite pleasant afternoon, teaching and learning about botany.



Johannson was late coming home. The sun had dipped below the horizon, jagged with silhouettes of various Base structures, by the time the sleek white flyer finally appeared, skimming along the glideway and up to the house. As a prearranged precaution, Kirk and Spock quickly concealed themselves among the densest foliage. Side by side they crouched among the multi-colored leaves and metallic extensions of the 'caretaker' machinery, listening as the flyer was parked, one person entered the house and approached the 'living room' entrance. Not until they heard three sharp-two soft raps against the floor did they vacate their hiding place, wading through the jungle toward the opaque wall. Johannson was waiting for them just within the door, looking like a cat who has just wandered into an unguarded seafood market.

Kirk came up to her eagerly, anticipating good tidings. "You've got a meeting scheduled!"

The woman smiled even more broadly. "Correct. Two weeks from today, to be precise."

"Two weeks?! Are you sure that's not being premature? They'll still be..."

"I can unconditionally guarantee you, it isn't." Sigrid was looking more self-satisfied every second.

"How many individuals will be attending this gathering?" It was Spock's inquiry.



"Something over three thousand." One Vulcan eyebrow rose, one human jaw went in the opposite direction. Johansson continued as if she hadn't noticed. "This will include representatives from every section of Star Fleet Command and every ship and base in the fleet, and delegate committees from all Federation worlds -- in each case, the highest officials able to attend."

Kirk found his voice. "Sigrid, what was that you were saying about this not making the Shield suspicious?"

"It won't!" she announced with a grand sweep of her arm. "They're the ones who are arranging it!"

Spock tilted his head speculatively. "In response to our escapade in the Records Department, by any chance?"

"Right. Apparently, they've finally figured out what we're up to, so they're out to discredit the evidence we've gathered against them before it's revealed. The Command Base has announced that 'alarming indications have been uncovered, of spies and saboteurs within Star Fleet, and conspiracies to slander many of the Fleet's most eminent echelons.' So, in order to mobilize the whole Federation against this 'dire menace', they're calling a full-scale General Emergency Meeting -- in the Great Assembly Hall, no less. In other words, they're setting up the perfect circumstance for us. If we show our evidence to all those delegates, there is no way the Shield will be able to whitewash it."

A sweet, hot rush of excitement swept though Kirk -- which he carefully subdued. He had to be able to think clearly now, to weigh all the possible opportunities... and the hazards. "No, they won't," he said, "but only if we convince the general assembly our evidence is authentic, and not one of the 'slandorous plots' coming to light. Spock and I don't exactly have shining reputations, after all these years of negative propaganda being circulated about us. Most of the delegates will be conditioned to consider us liars from the moment they hear our names."

"Ah, but you won't be presenting it alone. Every Vulcan in the hall will back you up, and all the Phoenix Conspiracy. I've already made sure a lot of them will be present. They've put me in charge of assembling a clique of representatives from the Medical Department, and under that guise I sent a duplicate communication to every ship and base: 'All my special associates please attend the meeting.' The Conspirators will understand the real meaning easily enough."

Kirk was having even more difficulty restraining his enthusiasm -- and even more difficulty convincing himself there was any need for restraint. This was a better chance than anything he had dared to hope for, if they used it carefully. He was in his native element now, planning a desperate venture, and one in which he himself would be taking a primary risk. The thrill of it -- of knowing his very life would depend on anticipating every possible variation -- brought all his strengths to the fore as nothing else could. Nonetheless, he kept his ebullience down to a reasonable level as he replied, "Even so; we mustn't forget that a large proportion of the Shield is

also bound to be there -- no doubt with their own contingency plots. Our most important consideration is; do we really have enough evidence to overwhelm their defenses?"

Spock cut in evenly. "Not necessarily, Jim. If we succeed in turning the tide of feeling against the Shield, we may not have to present very much evidence ourselves. Once the organization has been shown to be vulnerable, many officials who have always disapproved of the Shield, but never dared speak up against it, may be stimulated to do so. It might be compared to the way the lesser members of a predatory pack will unhesitatingly attack a much larger prey animal once the pack leaders have initiated the onslaught."

Johannson wrinkled her nose at this too-accurate simile, but Kirk clapped the Vulcan's shoulder in appreciation. Spock always provided the counterweight he needed in these planning situations, cool-headed analysis to balance his own driving emotional energies.

"Yes, that's the key. Everything is going to hinge on how we present the evidence. If we're to get the assembly to take our side, we're going to have to plan this very carefully." He rubbed his own chin. "It's too bad we don't have McCoy here, we could use someone with a degree in psychology."

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance in that area?" Sigrid reminded.

"Of course you could! My apologies, Sigrid, I forgot you were..."

Johannson got serious. "Forget it, Jim. But before we get to the meat, I think we'd better give some consideration to a more basic problem -- how are you two going to get inside the Hall? A General Emergency Meeting will be subject to stringent security measures. Only preregistered delegates will be allowed inside, and they'll be scanned at the doors. I've got equipment in my lab here to manufacture passable facsimiles of facial features and hair, but your physiologies can't be hidden."

After a moment's thought, Spock announced, "I do not believe I shall have serious difficulty gaining admittance. All I need to do is contact the Vulcan representative and make arrangements for me to enter with his entourage, disguised as one of his aides. The human features in my anatomy are too insignificant to be deterred by anything less precise than a medical scanner." He gave Kirk a concerned look. "It might be more prudent for you to forego attending the meeting, Jim. We have no connections with any of the terrestrial delegations."

Kirk gathered himself up for an indignant tirade, but Johannson spoke first. "I may be able to get Jim in myself. As a Section Head, I'm expected to be in the Hall early, before the Security Teams have finished setting up their equipment. I can probably manage to get by them with only an antiweapon scan -- me, and anybody the Security guards are used to seeing with me." She studied Kirk for a minute. "Jim, would you put your shoulders back?" Kirk, though puzzled, obeyed, and Sigrid's eyes lit up. "Yes, it could work. A thick wig, and one of those loose-fitting robes Ursulians wear on special occasions... You're already as tall as Dray, and your face has the right..."

Suddenly understanding what the Surgeon General was planning, Kirk protested.

"No! Sigrid, that would reveal your involvement in the Conspiracy. We can't risk doing that until we're sure we've won. For you to endanger yourself in any..."

Johannson spoke sternly. "Mr. Kirk, it is evident that you have grossly misjudged my motivation for participating in these efforts against the Rodinium Shield. I have not done so as a favor to you, or to anyone. I regard it as my personal battle -- and I have no intention of being excluded from the final phase."

It was not usual for Kirk to give in without a fight; however, in this case, it wasn't as if he could stop her. She had been in this conflict longer than any of them, a circumstance indicating a will at least as strong as his own.

"All right... if you're certain you want to take the risk."

Sigrid flashed her ironic smile, and this time there was a trace of malice in it. "Believe me, Jim, I wouldn't miss it for the Galaxy."



Kirk couldn't sleep. It was a familiar situation. He had known it the night before final exams at the Academy, the evening prior to assignment to his first command, and through more nights aboard the Enterprise than he cared to count. He and his fellow Conspiracy leaders had just completed two weeks of exhaustive planning and preparation. Tomorrow morning, the General Emergency Meeting would convene in the Great Hall, and this participant was going to be less than well-rested for it. The most annoying aspect was that his conscious mind was not experiencing the anxiety, it was only his subconscious that so stubbornly ignored the reassurances of his intellect. After several hours of experimenting with various positions on one of the living room couches, he finally conceded defeat and, having nothing else to do, sat up and looked about the room.

The stars were casting their pristine light on Sigrid's indoor jungle, making each leaf and blossom stand out as sharply as a paper cutting. One night-blooming shrub had just unfolded its opalescent flowers, sending a dewy-sweet fragrance through the still air. In the distance, the green and red lights of a flyer glimmered, but no sound penetrated the transparent walls.

Kirk got to his feet and began a leisurely stroll along the room's perimeter, letting his footsteps give some relief to the silence. Two dozen strides brought him to the doorway of Sigrid's bedroom, beyond which he could hear her slow, high-pitched breathing. That same inexhaustible fortitude and patience which had seen her through the years of solitary struggle remained faithful through these last few hours. Slightly disappointed, for he would have appreciated someone to talk to, Kirk walked on until he reached the second couch, at the far side of the room. Spock lay

there, legs flexed to compensate for the length, chest rising and falling evenly under his loosely folded arms, his head tilted just enough to allow a full view of his face. Jim had rarely seen his brother asleep before, and he paused for a long moment to study it.

The lighting gave a sublime aura to the Vulcan's expression -- a serene, ageless innocence, at once fragile and impregnable, like a delicate insect preserved inside a diamond. Kirk smiled affectionately, even as he felt a stab of guilt. Who knew what might happen to Spock if the Rodinium Shield won... ?

Oh, Spock, what have I gotten you into?

The Vulcan, of course, would maintain he had become involved of his own choice, but that did not alter the fact that Kirk was the reason he'd made that choice. This all started when you stole that memo, for me. If you hadn't, you'd be safe at home with your family right now. You never would have been drawn into this war, wouldn't have put your life on the line this way...

... and the Shield would have kept right on going the way it was, until it'd taken over completely.

Kirk sagged resignedly, acknowledging that this conflict was over a matter far more important than their well-being. But at this moment it was a source of profound regret to him that Spock was being endangered in the process. For a few seconds he experienced a purely instinctive, protective urge that made him want to take Spock in his arms and hold him, through all this night, as though to shelter him against anyone and anything that wanted to harm him...

The human almost whistled as he considered what Spock's reaction would be to that train of thought. Feeling weary, Jim carefully seated himself on the empty spot beside the Vulcan's knees, and tilted his head back to stare up, past the leaves and branches, at the stars. Not even in space had they looked any clearer -- fiery-white diamonds on a velvet plain -- a plain he had once roamed as freely as a wild animal in its wilderness. As it occurred to him that this could possibly be the last time he would ever see them, a long, slow sigh escaped him.

"Jim?"

Kirk turned his head to meet the fitful glitter of sable eyes. "Sorry. 'Didn't mean to wake you."

"No apology needed." The black jewels shifted as Spock raised himself on one elbow. "Is something troubling you?"

"Just a little insomnia."

"If you wish, I could... "

"No... no, thank you, Spock. I'd just as soon... stay awake for a while." Kirk's face turned back toward the stars. He felt the mattress shift, and then Spock was sitting beside him. For some minutes neither spoke as they regarded the shimmering expanse together.

"Ordinary human nervousness, that's all. Spock, do you realize, by this time tomorrow it'll all be over, one way or the other?"

"It is normal for you to feel apprehensive," the Vulcan conceded.

"But not for you?" Kirk grinned, but the smile faded as he looked into the mountain-like calm of his friend's face. His memory swept back to that night on the mezzanine -- only two years ago? -- when Spock had given him the wisdom to escape his private hell of hatred. Surely he could give him peace again, even now, on the eve of the fulfillment... or death, of all their hope.

"You know, Spock, I've been contemplating what it'll mean if we lose this, and get shipped off to penal colonies... for good this time. I'm trying to imagine what it would be, to spend the rest of my life in those soiled rooms, among all those bitter, hardened faces... never seeing the sky... And, you know what? The part that bothers me more than all the rest combined is the prospect of being separated from you again."

Spock studied the human, recognizing the anxiety which was also his, that this might be the last night they would ever spend together. "I, too, would regret that eventuality. Very much."

"Whatever does happen tomorrow, I'm not going to regret all we have done and had together over these last three years," Kirk continued. "They can throw us into some pit for the rest of our lives, or pack us off in chains to some stone age society, or arrange for us to have some fatal 'accident' in transit, but they'll never be able to take those years away from us."

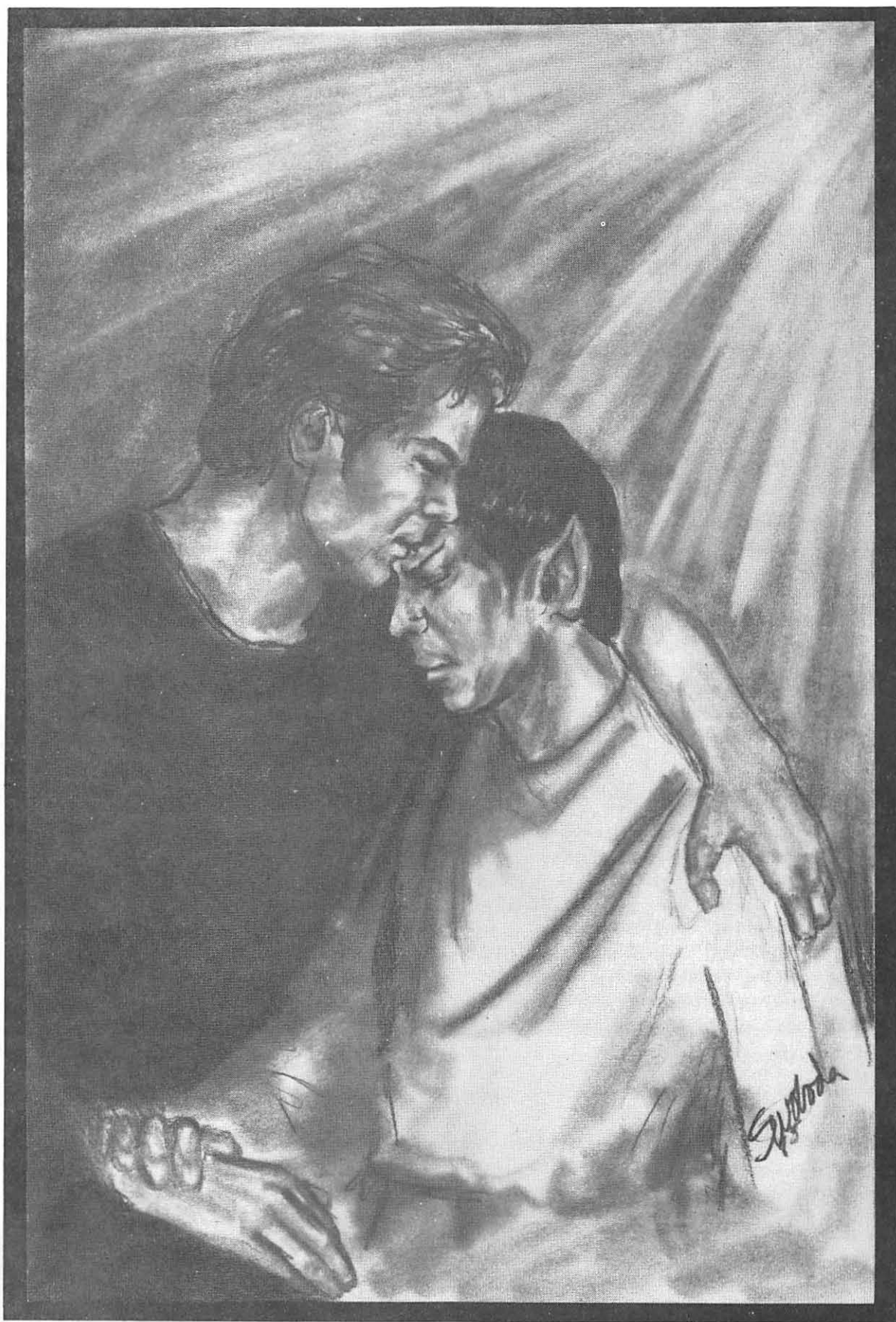
The Vulcan shifted forward to look at his friend full in the face. Jim met his eyes. Was it a trick of the starlight, or had that emotionless mask become, almost, tender?

"We have been to the depths, but also to the heights, Jim. In what we have been to each other... perhaps the greatest height of all."

Kirk's eyes widened, and Spock continued to face him without a trace of embarrassment. He knows, Jim realized with aching relief. He knows, this is one time to let his human half take total command.

Slowly, but without hesitation, Kirk acted out his earlier impulse. He reached out with both hands and pulled Spock close, tightening his hold until he could feel the rapid vibration of the Vulcan's heartbeat against his own rib cage, the warm respirations beside his ear. Spock made no protest, and after a minute Jim felt arms encircle his own shoulders with comforting







firmness. The human smiled to himself, as totally content as he had ever been in his life. They'll never be able to take this away from us, either, was his satisfied thought. Come what would, nobody could ever make it untrue that, at this moment, the two of them had fully acknowledged their love for each other.

He felt Spock's silky head incline against his neck, heard him sigh with similar peace of mind. Jim relaxed his embrace just a little, suddenly fearless of tomorrow, or of anything else.



The four entranceways at the corners of the Great Assembly Hall had just been closed. Four security teams took their places in front of them as the last few delegates -- looking, from Admiral Komack's vantage point, much like hermit crabs scuttling about in a variegated tidal pool -- made their way to their chairs. The Hall was a rectangulate amphitheater, built to seat three thousand humanoids. This was only the fourth time Komack had seen it filled to capacity.

The Admiral was sitting alone in the uppermost tier of the towering Scheduled Speakers' Platform, situated against the western wall. Directly across was the eastern seating bank reserved for Star Fleet and Star Base personnel. It held representatives from every ship and base, all in dress uniform, giving it the appearance of a huge blue/green/red needlepoint tapestry. A much wider range of pigmentations and costuming were displayed in the north and south seating banks where the colony governors and planetary ambassadors sat. Small light-brown podiums and transparent special environment partitions interrupted the chair rows at regular intervals; all the rest was a riotous rainbow patchwork. Every planet had its own ideas about what constituted appropriate clothing for a serious occasion, and followed those codes stringently. Even the Surgeon General's Ursulian aide was in native dress.

Komack eyed the assembly from left to right, picking out the various garbs and the people they signified. Seamed mahogany Tellerites, oddly contoured orange Vegans, unrelieved white Denebians, armored blue Andorians, scarlet and turquoise Jensahnians, neutral-shaded Terrestrials, wildly headdressed Rigelians -- all among the more militaristic, emotional species -- were strategically assigned to the northern wall. The more sedate and/or intellectual peoples, who would require reasoned persuasion, were in the southern section: diminutive copper Nakarotians, blocky tan K'Hotans, a big crowd of Coridans -- they never sent small numbers of their kind anywhere -- in saffron loincloths, Altarians in close-fitting lavender, silver and black Vulcans (all helmeted, except Ambassador Sulvic), Ursulians in voluminous emerald robes, and the Yaanians, misty in iridescent gossamer. Both banks were also permeated with the metallic glitter of hand-held translators. All delegates with less than perfect understanding of English were given these at the doors, so they should understand every word spoken at this meeting.

Along the bases of these sloped banks were twelve small Fleet Division daises, like an inner ring of poker chips. Each one held a speaker's podium equipped with a voice amplifier, commonly called a V.A., and two chairs at the back for one Division Representative and aide. Many section heads were personally fulfilling that function today. Komack noted Rear-Admiral T'Mont on Colonial, Surgeon General Johansson on Medical, and Security Chief Massey on Security, among others. The demonstration area in the middle of the amphitheater was the only clear space, save for an oversized UFP banner painted on the floor.

Komack was incapable of appreciating the esthetic value of the spectacle, tho, his mind being fully occupied with defensive schemes. He knew that the Rodinium Shield was in its most significant danger since Dessrand, but he was confident that, under his guidance, the organization would prevail yet again. The enemy might be more formidable this time, but so was the Shield.

Komack glanced down from the Meeting Chairman's seat on the third tier -- the highest point in the Hall. The second tier was occupied by the principal speakers: Admiral Arron Fitzpatrick, on his right, and Admiral Donald Fitzgerald, on his left. As usual, the former was calm as stone, while the latter shuffled his papers in agitation. Both were preparing to fulfill their specialized roles.

Further down, the first tier contained five of Komack's most capable operatives. Rear-Admiral Rowan Vardakis, the Meeting Secretary, held the central position, flanked by Sub-Admiral Charles Lynd, Sub-Admiral Naktake-Seebok, Rear Admiral Kikuji and Commander Adiarte. All of them, plus the hundred-odd Shield bearers scattered among the delegates, knew their individual functions in the planned course of action. Naturally, Komack had also made some personal preparations just in case plan A went badly amiss. The senior Admiral prided himself of dealing with these things realistically.

The last representative had been seated and Vardakis pressed the switch to sound electronically produced bell tones, signaling the meeting to commence. The low buzz of uneasy conversation quieted to a dim rustling as Chairman Komack activated all the V.A.'s on the Speaker's platform. He announced: "The Second General Emergency Meeting of all United Federation Members and Representatives of all factions of Star Fleet is now in session. The first speaker will be Admiral Arron Fitzpatrick."

Fitzpatrick rose, offered a collective welcome to all Star Fleet representatives, then proceeded to greet each planetary delegation individually, a formality which Komack found tedious and always assigned to a subordinate. The younger Admiral finally finished the list, affecting an air of grave concern, and began his speech proper.

He recounted the circumstances of the First General Emergency Meeting convened Stardate 3198. "I am certain that every one of us recalls that most fearful moment in Federation history -- when the Klingon Empire had massed to attack and it seemed certain that war was upon us. The intervention of Organia prevented that from happening. But, as our Vulcan citizens will

remind us, war is never truly ended until it is stopped voluntarily. So the Klingon Empire, their ambitions thwarted but undiminished, now wages a secret campaign of aggression to rip the Federation apart from within."

Fitzgerald related the many recent indications of spying and sabotage being perpetrated on Star Fleet.

"... all executed with an efficiency implying organized effort. Tragically, we must also conclude this was carried out by traitors within our own ranks. One of these was even apprehended in the act, within our own Command Base Records Department. Her subsequent escape clearly indicates other conspirators on this Base, most probably in this very hall. (The Shield-bearers in the seating banks took this cue to begin stirring up whispered anxiety.) "Extensive investigation has resulted in the Admiralty's conclusion that the ultimate purpose of these espionage activities is the demoralization and eventual disintegration of Star Fleet, and next, inevitably, the unity of the unprotected Federation. These quislings have been intently gathering data on the Fleet's most indispensable leaders; the type of information which, distorted and out of context, could be made to appear damning, implicating our Admiralty in serious offenses against Star Fleet and the United Federation of Planets. With their reputations compromised, the Admiralty would become ineffective in its function, robbing the Fleet of its strong administrative core. Eventually the Federation itself, torn by uncertainty and bereft of its principal defensive unit, would be left as vulnerable to attack and disarray as an organism deprived of its antibodies.

"What could induce any Federation citizen to try to bring about such a situation? The only conceivable explanation is that these conspirators are power hungry self-seekers who have sold out to the Klingons, having been promised jurisdiction over the rest of us once the Federation is brought to its knees... "

The meeting chairman gleefully hearkened to the murmur of indignant dismay from the ambassadorial sections, all the while maintaining his properly grim visage.

Even the Vulcan delegation seemed to prick up their ears (so to speak) as Fitzgerald lamented "... our present delight in our many diversities, lost to a pervading climate of mistrust and fear." Komack himself had composed that argument, being the most experienced of the Shield at manipulating Vulcans. He smirked inwardly as he recalled one particularly outrageous fabrication he had sold to the Vulcan Counsel, just by getting several officials to back him up.

One trait common amongst people of integrity was that they seemed to have no comprehension of organized deception. They could not appreciate that once a person's important personal values and motivations were known, he or she could be made to accept almost any falsehood. This was the purpose of the Shield's present maneuver. First, Fitzpatrick would exercise his special talent for intellectual persuasion on those 'swollen-heads' to the south, then Fitzgerald would take the floor to make a more emotional appeal to the northern bank, and set the stage for anyone accusing a Star Fleet official of anything to be an instant target of hostility. The successful execution of

such well developed strategies was the keenest pleasure Komack derived from managing the Rodinium Shield. He had shown a few people what it meant to cross swords with him!

Fitzpatrick concluded his address with the assertion that these despicable traitors had overlooked one crucial Federation defense. "It is our time honored tradition to regard any being as innocent until proven guilty, and to refuse to draw conclusions from anything less than complete, unimpeachable evidence. Never before has the need been so urgent for all of us to uphold that ideal!"

As Admiral Fitzpatrick reseated himself, several delegates made audible indications of support, a violation of meeting procedure which Komack made no attempt to suppress. He called the next speaker, Admiral Donald Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald rose, took a few calming breaths, and launched into an impassioned plea for Federation unity against this insidious threat. His speech was directed toward the northern bank, as Fitzpatrick's had been toward the southern, and was interspaced with flagrantly emotional denouncements of "... these unspeakable vile adventurers who look upon us all as their future thralls. For the sake of our descendants -- for the sake of the painfully won accomplishments of all our ancestors -- we must stand together against these traitors and their masters who cherish nothing -- revere nothing -- except their own ravenous power-lust."

Down on the medical dais, the Surgeon General was having a harder time than usual concealing her distaste. She had heard enough of Fitzgerald's famous 'solidarity speeches' to predict every over-expressive phrase and contrived tone before it was spoken. As usual, she amused herself by wondering if the Admiral knew he was describing the Rodinium Shield to a "T".

Keep looking intrigued, Sigrid. Give the impression you're buying every word. Now, of all times, let everybody in the hall believe you're a sheep.

But the near prospect of finally ending that degrading charade made it difficult to maintain. More annoying yet were the reactions of some of the delegates on the other side of the hall -- brisk nodding, bared teeth, spearhandle thumping and other shows of support were evident throughout the Northern bank. Making her move at just the right moment was going to be tricky. It would have to come before the herd-poisoning was too prevalent to stem, but after Fitzgerald was so caught up in his own rhetoric that he'd be apt to speak without thinking. That time was obviously near, since the Admiral had already made two unnoticed mispronunciations. Johansson decided to use the third error as her signal to move.

"On my knees, I implore you, every one of you, to make every possible contribution! A single action can make all the difference between victory and defeat! There may be some in this very assembly who have been involved in these crimes, perhaps in complete innocence, deceived by the lies of the original conspirators, who now see the truth and long to reveal it. My friends,

do not hesitate to set aside your own embarrassment for the sake of the much greater general welfare! There will be room for leniency for those who aid our fight against the true enemies, this cancerous conglomerate of... "

With deliberate hesitancy, Sigrid moved from her chair to the forward edge of the dais. She pressed the signal button on the speakers podium to alert the Secretary that she wished to address the assembly.

A corresponding knob lit up on Vardakis' board, and she was surprised to see who was making the request. Rowean had never known Johannson to speak up at a meeting unless the discussion turned to medical matters. However, the Surgeon General was of sufficient rank to be given special consideration, so Vardakis interrupted Fitzgerald's tirade. "Surgeon General Johannson wishes to offer comment, Speaker."

Fitzgerald promptly looked to the similarly startled chairman. Sigrid was one of those officers that Komack scornfully classified as "dedicated" -- so devoted to their specialities, you had to hit them over the head to get them interested in anything else. But, the Surgeon General's function included keeping track of the Fleet's psychological health, and discontented elements. If she were moved by Fitzgerald's call, she might well be able to reveal something useful. At Komack's nod, the present speaker responded, "Permission granted."

Johannson lowered her eyes self-consciously as she turned on her VA. "Thank you, Admiral. I, ahm, hope this won't turn out to be trivial, but you did say that we should do anything we could to help... "

"Yes! Only total devotion to this struggle will allow us to prevail!"

Definitely taken up in his oratory. Sigrid took care not to smile. "Well, that's why it's occurred to me I ought to tell you, I have a couple of associates who, I think, are in the situation you just described. I know they've been involved with people and activities they should've steered clear of, but I've gotten the impression they'd like to break from it, only they're afraid, because they've committed some possible misdemeanors during their association."

Fitzgerald leaned almost parallel to the tier surface. "Who are they? Are they in this hall now?"

"Yes, they are. I think they'd be willing to come forward, if only they could be sure they wouldn't be prosecuted."

A Red Alert went off in Komack's brain, a split-second too late for him to stop Fitzgerald from replying: "Pardon for all committed maledictions is hereby granted, by order of Donald L. Fitzgerald, Admiral, Star Fleet Command. Call your witnesses, Ms. Johannson."

Sigrid bowed, with all the solemnity an executioner offering a last salute to the condemned, and announced, "I call to this podium; James T. Kirk of Earth, and Spock of Vulcan."

A faint hiss swept the stands, the sound of three thousand sharp inhalations. In the ensuing stillness two humanoids stood up and proceeded to the front of the Medical dais -- Johannson's secretary and one of the Vulcan aides, the latter carrying a thick document case. As the Ursulian took Sigrid's place at the V.A., she reached to her forehead with both hands and peeled off her 'face', exposing another countenance instantly recognized by nearly everyone within view. The next moment, the former Enterprise captain slipped out of the red wig and green robe, and extended a hand to help the second figure onto the dais. There, the Vulcan removed his helmet, and yanked several fleshy strips from his cheeks, thus revealing himself to be none other than the son of Ambassador Sarek.

Komack's hands had clenched into fists at the sound of those names, but his primary reaction was not the rage of being tricked. He felt the exhilaration of an old warrior finally coming face to face with an elusive nemesis and realizing open battle was about to be joined at last. For him, the Great Assembly Hall had been transformed into his defensive territory with the numbers and positions of his own troops known and those of the enemy about to be revealed. Like a coiling snake, the Admiral gathered himself, ready to strike at any opening, and knowing every Shield-bearer in the hall was doing the same. Those three upstarts were about to discover just how dangerous an opponent they had challenged.

Two of the 'upstarts' were ready at the podium, standing straight as two black pillars festooned with red and silver. "If it please the assembly, we shall commence..."

"It does not please the assembly!" Rowean's icicle tone cut Kirk off as a confirming angry mutter, rose from the seating-banks. Vardakis aimed a matching glare at Sigrid. "Your assistance to these renegades is not only illegal, but a flagrant insult to this assembly, General Johannson! Having no Federation citizenship, they are denied any right to enter this hall, let alone to address..."

"One correction, if I may, Ms. Vardakis," interrupted a deep, velvet voice. It was Ambassador Sulvic, who, as a Senior Representative, had the privilege of activating his own V.A. "Per instructions of my government, I have granted Vulcan citizenship to them both, as of three point seven hours ago."

Those words squelched the delegates' complaining as well as Rowean. Sulvic's show of acceptance had cancelled any objections the other ambassadors had been about to make, just as Spock had theorized. On the third tier, Komack froze with his first stab of uncertainty -- the fear of a campaigner gazing over the Enemy forces, and finding them stronger than expected.

Instructions of his government! What's the Vulcan Council's connection with this? Have they just decided Spock's been punished enough, or, do they know something? How much? How'd they find out? The Shield-leader wet his lips and resolved to keep his attention on the immediate problem. When he was through with Kirk and Spock, he would see about placating the Vulcan Council.



Captain Kirk faced the Speaker's Platform, ignoring the assortment of hostile stares -- stern, flabbergasted and glacial -- that the Admirals were bestowing upon him. "Have I your permission to address the Assembly, Chairman?"

Hatred constricted Komack's throat. Kirk knew that he wouldn't dare refuse with the whole Federation watching. But that was all right. An enemy must be allowed to show his line of attack before any counterattack could be launched. "Permission granted. You may be seated, Speaker Fitzgerald."

Fitzgerald obeyed. His expression suggested he would gladly exchange his soul for some fast transportation out of the galaxy.

The Conspiracy leaders turned to the General Assembly, and Kirk spoke. "Honored gentlebeings, representatives from all Federation worlds, and Star Fleet, I shall begin by explaining how Spock and I came to be involved with this aforementioned 'spying organization', whose proper name is the Phoenix Conspiracy. Those of you who know the story, please bear with me. I'll be brief.

"Seven years ago, I was the captain of the USS Enterprise, and Commander Spock was my first officer. This situation ended abruptly when our ship had a serious accident at Repair Satellite VR-85, over Ursula. Two hundred and eighty-three crewmembers were killed, and the Enterprise required six months to repair. Much sooner than that, I was brought to trial for culpable negligence, found guilty and sentenced to four years at Brewster Penitentiary. Though I knew nothing of it at the time, it was the day after my courtmartial that Spock took the first step toward the formation of the Conspiracy."

Spock had opened his document case from which he now drew a pink-edged plasticine square, and he handed it to Kirk. The captain lifted it high, mouth quirked wryly as he recalled that this had once been the total volume of their evidence against the Shield. How much smaller it looked now. "This item, and all the others we shall present, will be submitted to a mutually approved examiner at a later time, but I report now that the date and office numbers on this memo indicate it was sent from Admiral Matthew Komack to then-Commodore Charles Lynd, on the day before my trial. The message within..."

"It pains me to cut short your moment of glory, gentlemen," broke in a maliciously smiling Komack. "However, I am obligated to point out that unauthorized possession of a Class Four memo is an Federation offense. Security Chief Massey, if you and your men will escort these two..."

"Objection." Sigrid darted back to the V.A. "The witnesses have already been granted immunity."

Not so demure now, eh, 'dedicated' Doctor Komack sneered inwardly and replied, "Procurement of such a memo is a felony, Ms. Johansson. Immunity was granted only for misdemeanors."

"Not quite, Admiral. I requested immunity for misdemeanors, but Admiral Fitzgerald granted it for 'all committed maledictions'." Komack's smile vanished under his 'Intimidating Scowl.' Sigrid ignored it. "As to my wording, I meant they'd committed comparative misdemeanors, because I don't think there's an honest being in this room who will consider their offenses very serious compared to what you and your corrupt clique have been into."

The Chairman responded in a growling monotone that made his associates shudder. "Surgeon General Johannson, of all the officials on this Base, you were the last one I had suspected of being a subversive. To learn that you have actually been taking part in these..."

"I think what you're really saying is that I have no business being any smarter than you thought I was. Isn't that right, Admiral?" She smiled, very sweetly.

"You've got a mean streak in you, Sigrid," Kirk whispered to her.

"Don't believe I've ever denied it," she cheerfully agreed as she returned to her chair, leaning far back with her hands clasped behind her neck. It was obvious that she was enjoying herself thoroughly.

The hall was humming again, mostly with non-committal 'what-do-you-think-of-that!' sounds, but here and there a definite pro or con reaction. It all died down, though, as Kirk continued. "The memo says; 'This is our opportunity to eliminate JK.' Now, while I have no doubt that Mistrs Komack and Lynd can offer some innocent explanation as to what 'JK' means, for me the obvious implication..."

"Jenshahnian Kirsch! It stands for Jenshahnian Kirsch!" protested the blond Ayran on the first tier.

Spock chided evenly, "Mr. Lynd, you are out of order."

"The hell I am! No one-hundredth as much as you are, sneaking in here with your illegal evidence, trying to insinuate..."

"There's no need for you to state the obvious, Lynd!" the Chairman bellowed.

"It's okay, Komack, I can explain it." The Admiral addressed the assembly in calmly earnest tones. "It's well known that Matthew Komack is a long-time friend of my family. He and my father were together in the first crew of the Republic. So, when I became Security Chief of Star Fleet Command, he gave me a bottle of Kirsh imported from Jensahn and advised me to set it aside for a really special occasion. It happened to be around the time of Kirk's courtmartial, when Komack heard that I was up for promotion, he sent that memo to suggest this was an appropriate day for us to drink it. That's all it means!"

"Was the Admiral in a habit of using Class Four memos for such trivial matters?" Spock inquired.

Lynd appeared to lose the use of his tongue for a couple seconds before answering. "It was a fine grade of Kirsch. I guess he didn't want everyone on the Base to find out about it and stop by for a taste."

Disbelieving noises went up from several sections, and not just from Conspirators. Komack ground his teeth with exasperation. Damn Lynd and his penchant for speaking without thinking things through!

"That 'evidence' won't be accepted in any court outside the Klingon Empire, Kirk!" snarled the chairman.

"I'm aware of that, sir. I am only presenting it here to illustrate why I became interested in finding out what was going on inside Star Fleet. After all, Commodore Lynd had voted to 'eliminate' me, and was subsequently promoted to Rear Admiral. I think anyone would understand why my curiosity perked, when Spock finally got a chance to show it to me. Purely by coincidence, we acquired our second suggestive document shortly thereafter." Kirk looked to his friend, passing the floor to him.

The Vulcan reached into the case again as he talked. "Some time following Captain Kirk's conviction, I was given command of the newly repaired Enterprise. I retained the position for only 5.963 months, however, before we were sent on an exploratory mission to the Roystadt System in Section B-11. There I was forced to destroy the ship because of dangerous irreparable engine damage sustained in a Klingon attack. Star Fleet's upper echelons maintained that I had done so needlessly, in order to avenge my captain's disgrace. So I, too, was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to exile from Federation Space.

"Through the next three years, I devoted myself to creating a tolerable environment for myself, and for my former captain, once he was released. Yet, it remained a constant enigma to me, how the Enterprise could have sustained such severe injury from only three disrupter hits. I finally learned the answer when one of my former officers secured this correspondence and sent it to me." Spock drew out the creased sabotage instructions and displayed them to the assembly. "This, too, might not be considered irrefutable evidence, since different engineers may give varying interpretations of the content. However, it indicates to my satisfaction that Admiral Fitzgerald ordered Proctor Keelius of Rigel Two to have the Enterprise sabotaged during repair work. These are instructions for linking the magnetic bottle around a ship's anti-matter pods to the energy feedback from the ship's defensive shields, in such a way that the bottle would be ruptured the first time the shields were subjected to strenuous pressure."

Amazed chirps, gasps, whines and clicks from the difference species present echoed through the amphitheater. And scorn from the podium.

"Did you actually think to wreck your revenge against us with such ambivalent scraps as these?" Fitzpatrick hastened to inject, his voice dripping contempt. Kirk replied with contrasting matter-of-factness.

"No, Admiral. We have never sought revenge against you, or anyone. Having learned that gross injustices had been committed, we were obligated to try to correct them, no more and no less than if they had been done to

someone else." To his own gratification, Kirk realized that he fully believed every word. The long fight against his inner darkness had been won, but no dwelling on that now; victory over the external enemy was still to be earned. "Furthermore, we haven't been your only victims. Once we'd put together our organization, it didn't take long to discover what kind of rottenness was growing inside Star Fleet Command: a conglomerate of paranoid, amoral status seekers who called themselves the Rodinium Shield!"

At that cue, Spock spread the entire contents of the document case on the podium -- a three centimeter stack of the Conspiracy's most important findings. The rumbling debate in the stands rose dramatically in volume. Fitzpatrick's speech was still fresh in every mind, and the present speakers had badly tarnished reputations. On the other hand, Surgeon General Johannson and Ambassador Sulvic were as well-respected as any officials in the Federation, and many of the Star Fleet members present had long suspected the existence of that 'rottenness'. A number of voices shouted for the traitors to be expelled from the hall, while an equal number demanded that the Admirals explain themselves. The chairman had to sound his Call-to-Order klaxon to quiet the room.

"Before you gentlemen proceed any further, I should warn you that committing felonies of the sort you're hinting at might easily overturn your unofficially granted pardon," Komack intoned threateningly.

"The warning is appreciated, Chairman. But I doubt anyone will be concerned about our crimes by the time we finish." Spock was already selecting the first paper from the pile, specifically not the Dessrand file. The Shield knew they had that, and had undoubtedly prepared a strong defense against it. The logical procedure was to start with items they wouldn't expect, and bring out Dessrand after the Admiral's credibility had been eroded. "The Phoenix Conspiracy's investigations also indicate the Rodinium Shield has not restricted its manipulations to Fleet matters. For example, here is evidence that Commander Raphael Adiarte, of Star Fleet Command, has been involved in efforts to blackmail Proctor Eexyam of Vega into signing a trade agreement."

"Commander Adiarte wishes to offer comment," Vardakis snapped.

"Permission granted," Komack shot back.

Adiarte, a portrait of self-assurance, didn't even bother to stand. "Captain Spock -- or, I should say, ex-Captain -- I have no idea what distorted item you're about to present to 'prove' this ludicrous allegation, but I can state here and now that my service record will show I have never been involved with any activity -- legal or otherwise -- concerning Vega." The Vegan delegates flapped their epaulets in affirmation. Spock paid them no mind as he raised a folded sheet of plasticine.

"I have here a file copy of a Stargram sent by Admiral Komack to Star Fleet Representative Nofret Halil, during the recent Third Vegan Conference. It reads, in part: 'Mr. Adiarte has gathered sufficient incriminating data on Proctor Eexyam. Proceed as planned.'"

"It Says No Such Thing!" Commander Adiarte had been transformed into a beacon of righteous indignation. "Honored Delegates, you have just witnessed a deliberate attempt to deceive you! Examination of that 'gram will reveal no names at all, only code letters!"

Spock turned a bland look on the commander. "And how is it that you are so familiar with the content, if you have never had any involvement with Vegan matters?"

Adiarte's reply was a beat quicker than Lynd's. "That's a very clever attempt to implicate me, Vulcan, but it won't succeed. It's too well known that I work as Komack's personal aide, and as such, I have security clearance. It's part of my job to glance over file copies before stowage, to make sure the code letters are in place."

With just a trace of smugness, the Vulcan unfolded the sheet and held it aloft, so that most of the assembly could see the blue Command Priority circle stamped on it. Adiarte blanched, while Komack did a slow burn.

"Mr. Adiarte, you could not have seen those code letters at a 'glance.' Priority stargrams are computer-coded. Only the specific individual to whom they are addressed -- or an A-7 computer expert -- may decipher them. Since you are neither, I can only assume you knew the message before it was coded, which implies you were very much involved with the business under discussion." Spock addressed the assembly again. "The Commander is quite correct in his statement that this communication contains only initials, as is frequently the case with Shield documents. It is therefore of limited value as evidence of any criminal activity, but I calculated that it might serve to demonstrate the veracity of some of the officials involved."

By now, Adiarte looked as tersely unwell as Fitzgerald and Lynd, and Komack was silently cursing himself for not electing to handle this affair alone. Hell take it all, he was always being dragged down by other people's stupidity!

Kirk picked out the next paper. "Here's something which might be especially interesting to all seconds-in-command present. It's an 8873.6 communication from Lamont de Berquem, then, as now, Captain of the Starship Eagle, to Deputy Chief Kikuji of Fleet Operations. There are no initials in this one. Evidently the Shield has used that device regularly only since my courtmartial. De Berquem begins by complaining: 'The crew is altogether too fond of Agrawal' -- referring to his executive officer. He next reminds Kikuji of 'my past-rendered services' and requests that Kikuji now return the favor by arranging to have Agrawal removed from the Eagle. De Berquem further points out the advantages of having Agrawal disgraced and demoted in the process, to preclude any possibility of..."

On the center of the Eastern bank, a balding captain lurched to his feet. "Where the ---- did you get that?!!"

"Meeting Procedure seems to have been dispensed with," Spock commented, noting the chairman's non-objection.

"Um-hum. The gloves are coming off now." Kirk checked to be sure Paul Messenger was out of de Berquem's reach before he answered. "It was removed from your personal file on Star Base Three, and subsequently dispatched to us by your own Records Officer."

The Eagle captain's eyes widened to accommodate his re-doubled rage, then he burst out laughing... too loud and too long. "Messenger! I should've guessed! That vindictive old coot! He fabricated this 'cause he knows I'm arranging his transfer to ground-post. Just can't face up to his being too old for shipboard duty! What proof has he got this file's authentic?!"

"My testimony, for one thing," stated a cold voice at his side.

De Berquem choked in mid-guffaw and whirled on his first officer, who was standing with his arms folded defiantly. They glared at each other, fire meeting ice head on, as the captain rasped, "Mr. Sulu, if you for one instant imagine I'm going to be lenient with you because Messenger is your friend..."

"Doctor Wabisi will confirm that file's origin, too," the former Enterprise helmsman went on. "And so will Behle, Kasindorf, Gorgrej, Kebba, and your personal yeoman. We all know how you and your cronies in Operations framed Nathoo Agrawal on charges of insubordination. That was repayment for you helping Kikuji to cover his tracks during the Promotion-for-Pay Investigations, wasn't it? And don't think that threat of courtmartial is going to frighten us into silence, either. Getting out from under your Command is no punishment!" Sulu sat down, giving no further attention to his captain's impotent rage. Johansson congratulated herself on correctly predicting which Shield-bearers would make over-vigorous efforts to vindicate themselves.

The representatives were chattering excitedly over these conflicting revelations. Kirk and Spock could almost feel the gathering wave of emotion in the hall -- a wave that could either raise them high on its crest, or crush them under its breaking. At this point it could fall either way.

The Rodinium Shield's coordinators realized that, too. On the second tier, a livid Admiral Fitzgerald pounded his fist against the tabletop.

"Chairman, how much more of this are we going to tolerate?! This is precisely what we've been warned about. I can see rifts forming already! Are we going to just sit here and watch the whole Federation fall into disunity?? Those men should be arrested!!"

"Nothing would please me more, Speaker Fitzgerald." Komack's venomous tone reminded the younger admiral that his own impulsiveness was the only reason it couldn't be done. Desperate to redeem himself, Fitzgerald leaped up, bellowing, "Order! I want order in this hall! You, Kirk!" He jabbed a finger at the medial dais as the noise lessened. "I want an answer from you!"



"You'll have to ask the question first, Admiral," Jim replied.

"You, and your fellow subversives, have done an unprecedented job of disrupting this Meeting with all these innuendos and contrived evidence. But, can you definitely prove a single one of these accusations? Can you produce so much as one irrefutably authentic, unambiguous document, or testimony from a single unbiased source? We do not request; we demand, that you prove a solitary charge to the satisfaction of this august assembly or else vacate the hall!"

Several hundred delegates voiced their agreement. Kirk, who had anticipated this development, nodded as though it were a reasonable request. "Would proof of the first charge, that my courtmartial was rigged, be sufficient?"

Fitzgerald snorted. "There is no way to prove what never happened, but do try, ex-Captain. Let this baseless slander be shown for what it is before the entire United Federation of Planets!"

A pity you elected to make your career in the service instead of trying for the theater, Mr. Fitzgerald, Kirk turned toward the eastern wall. He did not have to search the rows to locate the man he wanted, for he had been watching him since he'd entered the room -- the only juror who had pronounced Kirk's 'guilty' verdict with genuine reluctance.

"Commodore Ian Olandeen, will you please take the nearest speakers podium?" The indicated officer, a swarthy, brown-haired human with a childishly broad face, seemed surprised at the request, but obeyed. Fear stabbed at Admiral Komack again. Of all Shield-bearers, Olandeen was the one whose loyalty was most suspect. How the devil had Kirk known?

The delegates watched as intently as an audience at a drama as Olandeen reached the podium and Kirk addressed him matter-of-factly. "Now, Commodore, you were one of the five jurors at my culpable negligence trial, correct?"

"Yes," the big man answered in a curiously small voice.

"And you, like the other four, voted for my conviction?"

The Commodore flinched as though the question hurt. "Yes, I did."

Kirk made his tone gentler. "Will you please tell this assembly now, whether you were in any way urged to hand down that decision?"

"Yes, Commodore. Give us the truth," Fitzgerald coached.

Olandeen hesitantly raised his eyes to the Scheduled Speakers Platform. The Shield-leaders, tho pretending to wait patiently, were actually glaring at him like hungry hyenas, ready to tear him apart if he didn't tell their 'truth'. The Commodore bristled within, as he always did when anyone tried to pressure him into doing something, but this time his whole life's career was being held over his head. Only, was it really worth the price? All those sleepless nights? All those nightmares about that hell-hole named

Brewster Penitentiary? Almost involuntarily, Olandeen looked back at the being he had helped to send to that place. Kirk met his eyes with no trace of rancor, as though he had actually forgiven the Commodore for that betrayal, more than Olandeen knew he deserved. A second such sell out would be a dozen times harder to live with, but could he live without it, Olandeen reminded himself, glancing at the predators on the Speakers Platform... at Kirk, the Platform, Kirk...

Fitzgerald was burning with impatience. Everything, everything might hinge on Olandeen's answer. He had already waited much too long. His very hesitancy was creating a bad impression, as if he had something to hide.

"Come on, Ian. These good people are getting restless. You know very well what to say," Fitzgerald reminded with disguised menace.

"No, Donald!" hissed Fitzpatrick, who was more familiar with the Commodore's personal quirks, but Olandeen's resentment had already flared, snapping his judgment.

He barked: "What the hell's the use of denying it, Fitzgerald? It was bound to be found out sooner or later!"

At that, the assembly gave its ultimate display of astonishment; it was struck dumb. Olandeen inhaled deeply, a sound that drifted pathetically loud over the stillness. He had tossed away his future, and it felt as cleansing as it was painful -- like peeling off a scab. Since he had started the plunge anyway, he might as well finish it.

"Yes, Kirk, I was, persuaded to vote 'guilty', although not so subtly as was Lynd. Rear Admiral Vardakis -- she was a Commodore back then -- came to me in person two days before your trial and announced that she had a 'rare proposition' for me." The dark man smirked ruefully at the memory. "And that turned out to be the case. She said she was representing 'a clandestine decision-making faction of Star Fleet, which you have no doubt heard rumor of', and that this faction wanted to get rid of Captain Kirk. He was a disruptive element in the Fleet, was provoking divisions, she said. I guess that translates to: 'He's so popular he's bound to achieve a powerful position that we want for ourselves.'"

"So, if I would help them eliminate this 'dangerous influence' by rendering a guilty verdict, I would be awarded membership in this decision-makers circle, with all the benefits and privileges that went with it. When I expressed some disapproval of the idea, she blithely informed me that, if I were to refuse, this faction would see to it that I'd end up as a yeoman on a mining-outpost, and I could check with Rear-Admiral Celia Licone in Personnel if I didn't believe they could do it. So I checked..." Olandeen's eyes clenched shut with self-loathing just before he spat out, "That's the only time in my life I've ever knuckled under pressure, and nothing the Shield's done for me since has ever made me forgive them for it!"

The Commodore returned to his place with all the haughtiness of a man who had just discarded a rich prize he never really wanted. Seconds later, the silence was shattered by a general indignant outcry -- a sound very

much like a breaking wave. In the midst of it, Kirk noticed the iron-haired representative on the adjacent security dais whipping out a communicator. Hastily, he pointed him out to Spock. "Who's he calling?"

The Vulcan half-stopped to listen through the clamor. "He is instructing all security teams outside to call reinforcements, to make certain no one breaks out of the Assembly Hall. He expects to be making some arrests shortly."

"That's Security Chief Massey. So far as I've been able to determine, he's no Shield-bearer, though he's a stickler for obeying orders," Sigrid clarified.

Spock went on. "Massey was just asked what is causing all the commotion in here. He's answering: 'The start of the biggest de-contamination since the Ariannus Plague was wiped out. At least I hope so.'"

Kirk studied the agitated throngs. "I would guess there's a lot of people here who feel the same way just now."

"Indeed. I should judge the mood is favorable for the assembly to start launching a few accusations of its own."

Kirk chose another paper and leaned to the V.A. again. "Our next item," he announced, quieting the amphitheater more effectively than all of Komack's klaxons, "is another 'gram, sent from Admiral Fitzpatrick to Commodore Inez Stone, the one-time Executive Commander of Star Base Eleven under Commodore Jose Mendez. If we assign the most obvious meanings to the initials, we can perceive that Fitzpatrick is telling Stone than Mendez's investigation into 'the E-H incident' may badly damage the Fleet's reputation. So, if Stone will sabotage the effort, Fitzpatrick promises that he will be made the next Portmaster of Star Base Eleven, and 'a worthy guardian of all our best traditions'."

All eyes shifted to the Star Base Representatives row where Commodore Stone raised his chin disdainfully. "I do not care to dignify this charge with a response," he announced.

But the ruddy-faced aide beside him jumped up, screeching, "So that was why you had me remove all those reports from Mendez's file! It had nothing to do with checking for inaccuracies! I knew I should have trusted my own judgment over your orders!"

"You were right, Spock. Spoken with all the vehemance of someone who need fear no reprisals," Jim whispered. And then, since they had to encourage this kind of thing, he said into the V.A.: "Our thanks for your confirmation, Lieutenant." The youngster beamed under the subsequent applause.

After that, Kirk and Spock had only to describe the basic content of a document, and one or more would-be heroes would shout out supporting testimony, frequently accompanied by counter-accusations from the Shield-bearer involved, but the latter had fallen into general disfavor. Between readings, the furious rumbling would rise again, growing louder after each

new revelation; Nybakken's disposal, the plot against the Driscolls, Commissioner Ferris's many extorted treaty-signings, the accidental killing of Denebian Ambassadors Erstrave (the 'E-H incident'), which was made to look like a suicide, the framing of Commander Lo Sing to cover for Vardakis's negligence...

Chairman Komack disguised his increasing desperation behind his overbearing efforts to calm the audience, scolding them for 'mob behavior' and repeatedly sounding the klaxon, all in vain. Dozens of voices were calling steadily for the perpetrators to be arrested; Kirk was sure he could hear Leonard McCoy's among them. Other voices countered, denouncing the conspiracy leaders and demanding that they cease this incentive to riot. Jim wondered how many of these were Shield-bearers making a last-ditch effort to turn the tide of opinion, and how many were misguided loyalists who couldn't -- or wouldn't -- believe their superiors had done such things. He felt genuinely sorry for the latter as he raised a hand for silence and drew a single file-cassette from his belt pouch.

"We had no opportunity to convert this item to transcript form. This is the file which was stolen from the Command Base Records Department two weeks ago, and which motivated the Rodinium Shield to call this Emergency Meeting. They had hoped to discredit it as a slander plot before we could show it to anybody. However, under the present circumstances, I believe we may be allowed to present it without being shouted down." The whole assembly hushed as Spock handed Kirk a small file-player. The captain inserted the cassette and proceeded to read aloud the Dessrand file, word-for-word.

He hadn't quite reached the half-way mark before the groundthunder sounded again, not merely angry now -- incensed. This time there were no detractors, none of the former hecklers dared to speak up. As Kirk progressed, even normally staid delegates began to contribute gestures of intense disapproval. Beaks clapped, headresses rattled, fists shook. By the time he reached the last paragraph Kirk had to yell to be heard. Not that it mattered. The assembly was already convinced.

When he finished, he joined Spock in looking to the Speaker's Platform. The occupants resembled a rat-pack caught in a rising flood, pressed against the tier-backs or hunched down in their chairs, their faces displaying disbelief, fury or terror. Only Komack, leaning heavily against the uppermost tier, showed no particular emotion. He was staring, detached at the turbulent rainbow masses as his mind systematically assimilated the fact that his personal empire -- the magnificent, far-reaching, invincibly strong Rodinium Shield -- was fatally wounded.

Yet he, Komack, would endure. He would endure because he was a realist who always made provisions for the worst that could happen. It was part of what made him a leader wherever he went, and why he weathered each storm he encountered.

In contrast, it had obviously never occurred to that imbecile, Fitzgerald, that things could ever come to this. Komack's eye was drawn to the junior admiral as he leaned close to his V.A., still trying to sway the assembly. Talk was the only thing he had ever been good for.

"My fellow Federationists, if I might have your attention for... Delegates, please!" Fitzgerald pleaded into the grid. "This file hasn't even been verified! If you will allow me just a few words..."

"You have had altogether too many words, Admiral!" Sigrid Johansson was at the front of her dais again. Her voice, now devoid of any trace of amusement or irony, rang with the full authority of her office as she swept an arm toward the upper tiers and pronounced, "As Senior Official present, I place you, Admiral Fitzpatrick, and Admiral Komack under arrest on multiple felonious charges. Commodore Massey, take these three into custody!"

Half the hall cheered at this final confirmation of the Shield's vulnerability, but the furor died almost at once as Komack smiled -- an unnatural, leering smile, directed at Johansson, Kirk, and Spock.

"I'm afraid you don't get me out of your life that easily, my dear Sigrid, my very fine gentlemen." His expression twisted into the most intense malevolence most of the viewers had ever seen and his glare swept the entire assembly. He hated them all for witnessing his defeat. "And neither are any of you! None of you will ever be able to forget about Matthew Johnithan Komack!" With that, he slammed his palm against his belt and the hidden control therein. The whine of an accelerated transporter echoed through the room. Komack's form burst into sparkles and was gone.

For the second time that morning, the Hall was stunned into silence, except for Spock. One eyebrow raised sardonically, he noted, "One would have thought him capable of a more original parting-shot."

"He probably didn't think he'd ever have to use it," Kirk was glancing over the seating banks, picking out all the Shield-bearers from their betrayed expressions. "Come now, people, surely you're not surprised that your fearless leader had a bolt-hole ready for himself?"

Sigrid hadn't stirred a centimeter. "Massey, stand by to receive modified orders. Montgomery Scott?"

"Here, Ms. Johansson." The engineer had already made his way to one of the floor-level podiums.

"I understand you gained access to the platform's interior last night?"

"Aye. 'Twere no great problem, w' my credentials. It was just what you figured; Komack had a one-use transporter unit under his chair, the coordinates set for a patch o' nothin a hundred kilometers outside the base compound. I s'pose if we were to hike there now, we'd find a fast scout-ship parked nearby."

"Unnecessary, now, but do say what you re-set the coordinates for."

Soctty grinned wolfishly. "Well, Lass, me an' Doctor McCoy discussed that fer some time, after we first got your instructions. An' we decided that, since all yer work for the Conspiracy had slowed down yer development of the Royventis vaccine, it'd be poetic justice fer Komack to beam himself into your Medical Specimens vault."

Johannson's face lit up with unholy delight. "You didn't!"

"Ah, but I did, Lassie. We figured it'd be the safest place in the Base for him. With his germ-phobia, he probably got one eyefull of those Royventis vials an' went into a dead faint!"

Sigrid pressed her knuckles to her lips in an unsuccessful attempt to stifle a snicker. Other mirthful noises came from the audience (which had been hanging on every word). A few of the more demonstrative delegates laughed out loud. It proved contagious. In seconds a solid roar of hilarity was shaking the hall. Even the people in the southern seating bank made their own restrained contributions to the community celebration. Potential lynch-mob passions had been given a constructive outlet.

Sigrid was completely lost to it; she folded over the podium yelping like a seal. Kirk's command discipline prevented him from going that far, but he was obliged to lean against one of the chair backs and laugh until his ribs hurt. It was left to Spock to instruct Massey to send an outside security team to the Medical Lab. The inside teams were already escorting the remaining Sheild-bearers from the room.

Gradually, the laughter gave way to less raucous sounds of relief -- the relief of a long illness healed at last, or an oppressive overcast finally lifting. Sigrid regained control of herself and straightened, brushing happy tears from her face.

And Kirk... Kirk found himself panting from sheer triumph. Could this be what the ancient Prophets used to feel when they emerged from obscurity to thunder long-hidden truths to believing masses?

He turned to the one sharer of that all-consuming euphoria.

"What was it I said three years ago, Spock? 'We can't be made to wallow when we would fly'."

The Vulcan looked to him, eyes radiant, and smiled -- a smile meant only for Jim out of all those thousands. "It would seem to be confirmed, Jim. Together, I believe there is no height to which we could not soar."

## *Epilogue*

James Kirk leaned over the terrace corner to get a better look at the sunset. It was an unusually paradoxical one; fiery red and gold swirls besieging a peaceful rosy orb -- altogether, a fitting signature to the most frantic and soul-satisfying day Kirk had ever known.

Immediately following this morning's drama in the Meeting Hall, he, Spock, and the other prominent Conspirators had submitted to being whisked away to repeat their testimony, this time under the scrutiny of the latest development in lie-detectors. Then they had been called to give it again before an endless round of officials, several of whom they'd managed to implicate on the spot. Not until evening had any eclecton given thought to



their need for rest, whereby they were assigned to rooms in the Ambassadorial Living Quarters complex. The two conspiracy leaders had been given the Alpha Suite on the twentieth floor. These rooms were much to posh for either of their tastes, but at least were guarded against any kind of attack. And, being at the edge of the unsettled area, there was nothing to mar the primal beauty of the setting sun.

The captain glanced to his side to see if Spock was enjoying it as well. His his companion was seated on one of the corner lounges, fingers steepled before his face, eyes unfocused as he turned most of his mental energies toward inner contemplation. The human could only guess that it must be the normal Vulcan reaction to the day's events. Well, Spock was alone in his preference.

The rest of the terrace was crowded with various humanoids, sipping drinks and conversing in small clusters -- the twenty-odd Phoenixes who had gathered here for a low-key victory celebration. Bones, Scotty, Joanna, Sulu, M'Benga, Sigrid and Dray were among them, but the majority were newer friends. There was eagle-faced Dr. Wabisi; Lanv, the Andorian from Scotty's engineering department; rugged but gentler-looking Paul Messenger; M'Benga's Chief Nurse, Hisaka, who resembled a porcelain doll; Yeoman Adnov, the Denebian, with her snowy hair; the Fulani warrior Kebba; Robyn Korgecki, radiant with Croation beauty; and a dozen others whose familiar names Kirk had not yet matched with the proper faces. But he would have plenty of time to learn. They were going to build an empire together.

Minutes ago, the Captain had disclosed his own plans for the future. As soon as the clean-up had gained enough momentum to proceed without them, he intended to gather an expedition to seek out and colonize an uninhabited Class M planet. From the tone of the discussions around him, it was obvious that most of the other conspirators were partial to the idea of joining him (as Joanna commented; "It'd be a dreadful waste to break up such an effective team.") So far, the only definite dissenter was the Surgeon General, who preferred to retain her position until retirement age. Kirk could see McCoy leaning against the railing beside her, still trying to talk her out of it.

"You really certain, Sigrid? You must know how much we could use your special talents on this trip," he coaxed in his most charming southern drawl.

But Johansson gave her launguin-juice a brisk stir and answered firmly. "I'm certain, Leonard. You'll be needing somebody here to keep an eye on Star Fleet. In addition; you should know better than most that I can't drop all my responsibilities to go joy-riding across the galaxy. Not that the idea isn't appealing." Her tone became wistful. "Putting together new worlds -- that was the dream Star Fleet was founded on, the source of its greatness. Then the Rodinium Shield came along and turned the Fleet into their personal power vehicle... but that's over now, and the dream rises again. Which is what we all worked for, isn't it? To make Star Fleet great again.

Be assured, I'll be honored to join your colony, about four years from now."

"It's a date, then." McCoy clicked his glass against hers and drained it appreciatively, while Kirk beamed. It was profoundly gratifying to observe the level of affection in this group -- notably between Sulu and Messenger. Those two were presently discussing the possibility that Pavel Chekov would want to forsake his Community Representative post on Earth, to join the expedition. The prospect of having all his officers around him warmed Jim to the core. And it would happen within a month. Spock had already sent the summons to Eskar, to bring T'Prenn, the children, Uhura, and the Driscolls here. No doubt, the Vulcans would want to make an extended visit to their native planet, but after that...

The perpetually tossed head of Lieutenant Ramon Behle popped thru the terrace doorway, and all conversation ceased as the partiers looked to him expectantly. Behle and the other security-trained Conspirators were posted at the Complex entrance, where they screened all new arrivals and, if they could prove themselves to be fellow Phoenixes, escorted them up to the suite. Ramon drew himself especially straight as he announced; "Latest arrivals, all the way from Eskar; Sterling and Almarine Driscoll!" Everyone broke into applause as the newcomers stepped through the archway, wearing somewhat ruffled export-fleet uniforms, but obviously happy to be there. Johannson at once stepped in to guide them around the balcony, introducing them to their co-conspirators. Mutual delight was expressed at each encounter until they reached Kirk and Spock's corner. "And you already know our Conspiracy leaders," Sigrid finished, but the Driscolls looked suddenly abashed. Kirk gave a happily surprised greeting, but Spock, fully alert now, regarded his employees with disapproval.

"Captain Driscoll, your orders were to remain outside Sector L-37 until you received contramanding instructions."

"We did, sir. Receive countering instructions, that is. From the Intrepid II, a few minutes after you were beamed aboard."

Alma took over. "First Officer T'Tonya explained over the radio that you and Jim might be needing transportation away from Star Fleet Command, which they couldn't provide. So the Intrepid took our shuttle in a tractor and towed us along, as far as the Gamma 4-G system, where we were told to establish a hidden orbit and wait for further orders. That's where we've been until nine hours ago, when we got Johannson's victory message." All eyes turned to Sigrid, who shrugged disarmingly.

"My apologies, so far as they're needed, for usurping your authority, Spock. But you know, I had been told to make 'any preparations possible' for your invasion, and I thought that should include arranging a fast exit for you. So I instructed Captain Selif to determine if the vehicle that brought you to the rendezvous point was a Phoenix member, and, if it was, to draft it into my service. It might have been your lifesaver."

The Vulcan seemed unmoved, so Kirk jumped to her defense, "She's right, Spock; we as much as commanded her to do it. Let it go."

"I have known you to be considerably less lenient with subordinates who have put themselves at risk for you, Captain."

"I... " Jim suddenly realized how true that was. "Well, maybe I have, but that doesn't... "

"And I have always considered that attitude highly illogical." Spock's deep gaze swept over the three culprits. "No more need be said of this matter," he pronounced, making it sound like a disciplinary action.

"Fine! Now we can move along to more important things," Bones said jovially. "Sterling, Alma; we're making some great plans, and we'd be pleased for you to be part of it. A lot of us have already decided to help Jim find a new planet, where... "

"Thanks very much, but no. At least for now," Sterling declined. "But we'll be happy to contribute something to the effort. We were just talking to Admiral Daru at 'Central, and... Well, to put it briefly, Jim, if you need a Star Ship for this trip, feel free to ask for the Constellation II."

"Sterling! They gave you a new command!" Kirk exhaulted.

"Not quite. They gave it to Alma. I'm going to be the First Officer."

The Conspirators clapped again as the Driscolls took a bow flushed but gratified.

"Are ye sure Star Fleet's not gettin' back at you, Sterling? Dropping you from Number One ta the Number Two spot?' teased Scotty.

"I don't think so. They've just trying to make it up to Alma -- after all, she's the one who was courtmartialed. It probably won't be that much different for me. She always did make half the decisions."

The lady under discussion was pulling her lip thoughtfully. "You know, Jim, there's quite a few people on the Mithenvar who would jump at such a chance, to have an actual home again. You should ask them -- and the best of the crews of the other transport vessels."

"This is shaping up as a very motley colony," Korbecki noted through another mouthful of rolkan sprouts.

"That's the best kind -- 'Infinite Diversity Infinitely Combined,'" Jim quoted. "Which reminds me, Spock, I'm sure there'll be time for you to take your family on a long trip to Vulcan before the expedition leaves. Do you think there's any possibility your father might want to come along?"

"Indeed there is. I shall extend the invitation at the earliest opportunity." Spock's expression softened as he anticipated that meeting. The Kaythem-Velm bond had ended on schedule, upon completion of the Conspiracy's task. When he next encountered Sarek, their relationship would be father and son again, and no trace of guilt or resentment, conscious or subconscious, would ever return to either of them.

A marginally intoxicated Ensign Kebba theorized, "Sounds as though we'll be able to staff the whole expedition, from just our friends and relatives."

"Wouldn't be bad at all! Commradarie right from the start!" Bones agreed enthusiastically. "Sigrid, what about that friend of yours who started this whole thing... Lo Sing? Would she be interested?"

The Surgeon General lowered her face to study the amber pinwheels reflected in her drink. "I'm afraid it's too late for her, Leonard. She died on Benecia nine months ago. Of Sythococcus."

Silence fell over the gathering at this reminder that some things were gone beyond recall. Amanda was dead. And the Enterprise... Once more, Jim found himself envisioning the familiar sights and sounds on the bridge of that beautiful, beautiful vessel. It was different this time, however. With his future bright before him, Kirk was at last fully willing to consign that image to his past.

The general melancholy lasted only a minute, but that was sufficient to dissipate the partying mood. The other conspirators gradually bade their hosts goodnight and drifted off, alone or in pairs, returning to their own apartments. A quarter-hour later, Kirk and Spock were alone on the terrace.

The human solemnly offered a toast to the last smudge of daylight before draining his chalice. "So foul and fair a day I have never, never seen."

"Your pardon, Captain?"

"Nothing. 'Plagerisms of the half-asleep.' Forty hours without rest is rather a lot." Jim gave a colossal yawn as he settled on the lounge beside Spock's. He felt... oh, there was no word for it. All the personal and high anticipations that he had been denied for the past seven years were upon him now; he could almost believe it was worth everything. "I s'pose we'd better turn in soon. We're gonna be busy tomorrow," Kirk murmured, but made no attempt to rise.

"Agreed. Our continued efforts shall probably be required for at least the next three weeks." Spock sounded as though he were reciting a routine duty roster.

"You know, Spock, it's a good thing for the literary community that it was Beowulf who killed Grendel in ancient Denmark, and not you. Otherwise all we'd have to read would be: 'And he, seeing the foul monster slain, spake thus: "That's fine, men, now let's get home and tend to the harvest."'"

The Vulcan finally thawed at that, one corner of his mouth tugging upward.

"Admit it. You are happy, aren't you, Spock?"

The other side of his mouth rose to match the first. "You know I am, Jim."

"Sure, I know. but it gives me a personal high to hear you say it and I need an indulgence after a day like this."

The human lay back to watch the first star appearing in the wine-dark sky. Perhaps that was where they would find their new planet. "Sigrid's right; that's the dream we were all working for," Kirk commented, his voice blurred with fatigue. "To be free to seek and develop new worlds -- or just explore among them as part of a great collective effort, and with no fear of being thrown out the first time you cross paths with somebody's ambition... What were the odds against our succeeding, anyway?"

"I have never calculated them."

"Didn't dare to, eh?" Spock's suddenly shy expression was answer enough. Kirk laughed gently and reached to pat his companion's arm. "I can't say I blame you. To very, very few people is it given, to do anything comparable to what we did. Makes you think, doesn't it? That maybe it wasn't all our own doing?"

"I take it you are pondering the possibility of Divine Intervention?"

"Or, call it Karma, Providence, the 'Patterns of Sand and Stars', Kismet, L'arshvee Sebyowtock, Relvinave's Eyes -- whatever culture's nomenclature you prefer. Oh I know, from a strictly scientific outlook it's pointless to speculate on the matter 'cause it doesn't yield to objective analysis, but don't you ever wonder about it? That perhaps there is some higher intelligence keeping track of our lives, helping us to beat the odds?"

The Vulcan looked his friend straight in the face, and replied gravely. "I have, Jim. Often. But I don't regard our victory over the Rodinium Shield as the most convincing evidence for it."

"Oh? What do you consider to be the strongest proof?"

Spock looked to the hand, still resting against his arm, and took it within his own. "Simply that, out of all the millenium, past and future, and out of all the universe's vastness, you and I belong to the same time and space. And managed to find each other."

Jim's eyes glowed as he returned the pressure against that lean, hard-muscled palm. So strong, so steadfast... I wonder if I could have seen this war thru to the end without him? Or he without me? "Same here, Spock. Same here."

Hands still clasped, the two of them sank back in the lounges to regard the sky together. Some minutes later, Kirk chuckled softly. "Since we're already on the subject of metaphysics, I think I'll have a try at prophecy." With his free hand, he pointed out an especially bright group of stars, north and about fifty degrees above the horizon. "I predict we're going to find our new home world somewhere among those."

"Indeed? What inspires you to this supposition?"

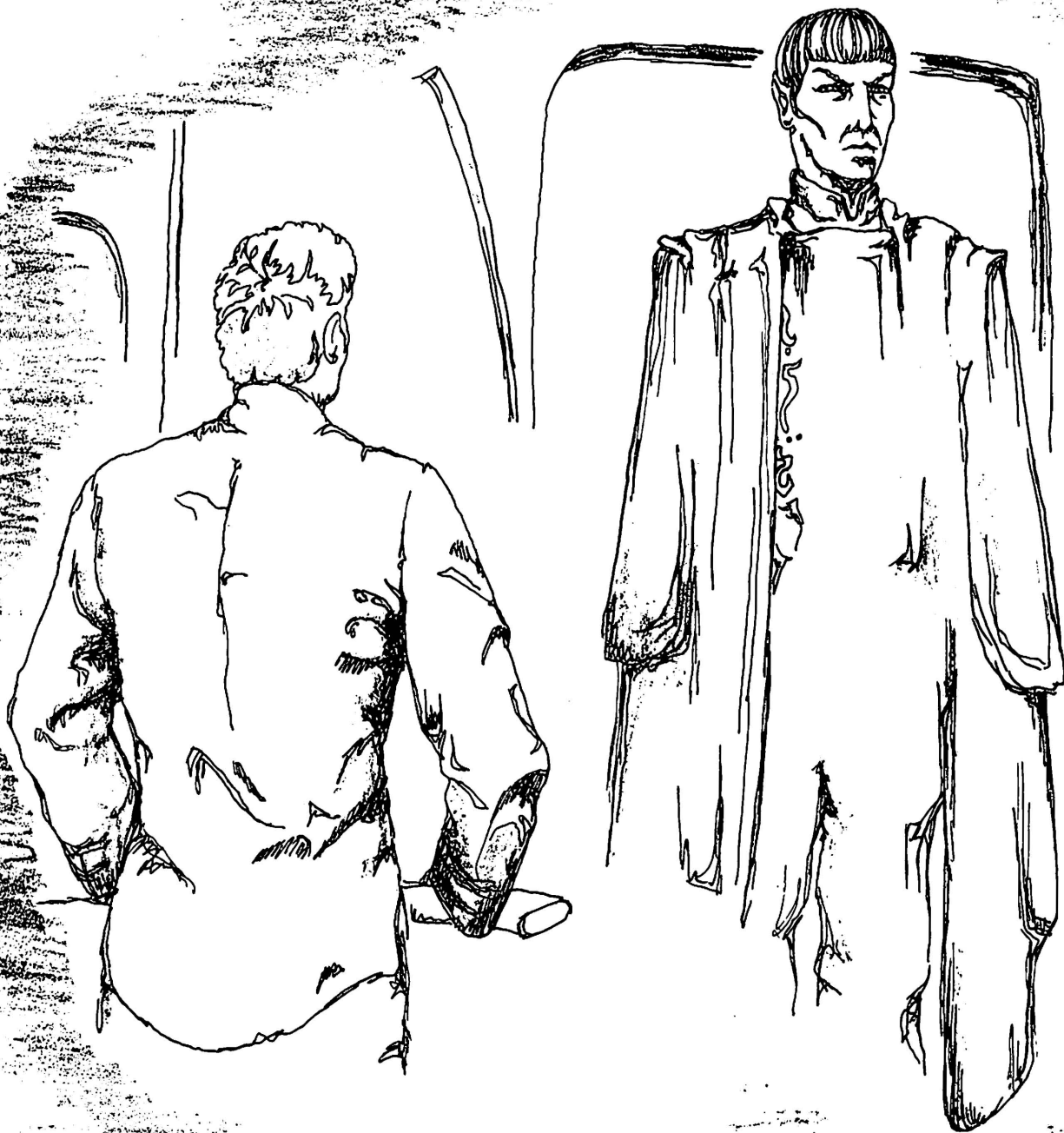
"Keep looking at them -- you'll see why."

Spock regarded the constellation intently. And he saw it. Vague but unmistakable -- the outline of unfurled wings and proudly raised head, as of a great Bird rising in flight among the stars.

*Beneath the ashes fire still burns;  
All things to their fulfillment rise,  
No plan of men or devils bar  
The Phoenix from her sundered skys  
Nor stay that predetermined hour;  
Night-time but preceeds the Dawn  
When, born again from ash and valor,  
The risen Sun Bird journeys home,*







# Reporting as Ordered



*By: Susan Meinecke  
Art: Andrea Kunz*

As I sit across from you,  
my resolve breaks;  
I cannot help but pour out my soul.  
I had wanted to keep the truth from you  
for it was clear  
from the welcome I received,  
that for you,  
our lives could resume  
where they had left off.  
But no.  
I cannot allow myself to succumb  
to the comforting familiarity of  
forbidden emotions.  
Then or now.  
Such is not the Vulcan Way.  
However, but to sit here and calmly state  
my expectations of our mission  
on the heels of your open declaration of need  
seems, even to me,  
deliberately cruel,  
no matter how unfortunately necessary.  
It takes all the strength I can muster  
to maintain this unflappable pose.  
I cannot allow myself to weaken now  
when I am so close to what I feel  
will be a resolution to my lifelong search.  
Still, why do I feel this ache deep inside  
when I look into your eyes?



# Beyond the Starless Sea

*By: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener*

Spock ran down the dimly-lit corridor, drawn by his empathic response to James Kirk's pain, sensing only one life-force which meant they had lost McCoy. Spock put that great, aching sense of emptiness from his conscious mind.

Let me be in time, he prayed silently to whatever gods watch over starship captains. Not to save him; for Spock knew -- without knowing how he knew -- that this time escape from death was impossible, only to be with him so he would not die alone.

Spock passed door after closed door, each identical to the last, drawn inexorably to the door he now faced as surely as by a beacon in a storm-tossed sea.

Spock was alone. The Enterprise had left Kirk, McCoy, Spock and a Federation Representative to dedicate the new medical facilities, while the ship proceeded on its assigned mapping mission. The attack by a dissident faction of natives had been totally unexpected. They resented the planet's progress into the space age and were determined to make such passage as difficult as possible.

The attackers had brutally murdered almost everyone at the new facilities. Spock had been spared only because he had been away gathering samples of the local plant life. One of the native survivors had told him of seeing Kirk and McCoy being taken away, prisoners who were to be executed because they were "off-world devils".

Spock had searched frantically for two days, finally locating this abandoned dungeon far from the settlement. It was here he was drawn by stronger and even stronger echoes of Kirk's agony.

The heavy wooden door squealed open on rusty hinges to reveal two still and bloody forms -- one in blue, one in gold.

McCoy lay on his back, arms outflung, the familiar blue eyes wide and staring. From the trail of his blood, Jim had evidently crawled from the

opposite side of the room to reach the doctor. He lay face down, his right hand clutching McCoy's left; the dying comforting the dead. Spock shuddered involuntarily and knelt down beside Kirk.

"Jim," he called softly, almost reverently. His hands hovered in mid-air, hardly knowing where to touch Kirk so as to cause him the least additional pain.

Kirk stirred fractionally, soft moans breaking the sepulchral-like silence. Spock took Kirk's hand and gently pried it away from McCoy's cold grasp.

"No," came the whispered denial as if this final parting were more than Kirk could bear.

Spock sat cradling Kirk in his arms: a kind of shock had overtaken the Vulcan but in turn it gave him a kind of peace. He knew Kirk was dying, that there was no ship, no help, no hope. It freed him to savor these last few minutes, to imprint them in his mind and heart. They would sustain him until he could exact retribution upon the murderers and then be free to join the Captain and the doctor in death.

Kirk's labored breathing filled the room, and Spock longed to be able to help him. The once-sparkling eyes, now dull with pain, opened slowly.

Kirk was not surprised to find Spock holding him. His First Officer was always there when he needed him.

Strange, he had often wondered how he would face death when the time came. Now he knew: there was a calmness, almost a serenity. He was not frightened.

"Bones... is dead, Spock," he said sadly.

"Yes, I know," Spock whispered, unable to trust his shaking voice to say more.

"He... he was very brave. I want... it logged... officially... Commendation for Bravery," Kirk said proudly. "Why? Why did they do it, Spock? Bones never hurt anyone. He... didn't deserve to die... like that..." He closed his eyes against the remembered horror and the encroaching pain. There was so much he wanted to tell Spock.

"Before he... died," the word was still so hard to say, "Bones told me that he loved us both... he wanted you to know..."

Spock swallowed hard and nodded.

Kirk's eyes locked with his as if he could see into the very soul of his trusted friend. "You have been the... wind beneath my wings, Spock."

You... have sustained me." Kirk paused to draw a rasping breath. "Bones used to accuse me of using you... and I did."

"My life has always been yours to command," Spock protested.

Kirk smiled a ghost of a remembered smile, then gasped as waves of agony washed over him. He grabbed the front of Spock's tunic and buried his head in the Vulcan's shoulder.

"I love you, Spock. Know that," came the muffled voice. Kirk drew deep within himself for one last bit of strength and raised his head. "Come with me, Spock."

Spock brushed the blood-soaked hair back from the sweaty brow. "I cannot. I was self-sworn to defend you, and I failed. I must punish those who did this."

"Revenge won't change anything," Kirk said, using the last of his fading life-force to try to make Spock understand. "Come with me, please," he said again, his eyes drifting closed.

"I must not," Spock whispered. "I have my oath."

Tears streamed from the dying eyes, running silently down Kirk's cheeks, streaking blood and grime.

Spock gently wiped them away. "You have never wept for me before."

"Once," Kirk said quietly.

"I will fulfill my oath and follow you," Spock promised.

Kirk tried to speak, but choked, a trickle of bright red blood tracing a course down his chin. "It doesn't... work that way, Spock... don't hate," he said. For a moment, his eyes seemed to see beyond the cold, barren room to a crisp black sea where sailed a proud and mighty starship. Then, taking one last shuddering breath, he grew very, very still in the Vulcan's arms.

"Jim... ?" Spock cried softly, knowing he would hear no answer. "I do not hate..."

And suddenly, Spock realized that he did not hate -- he loved, and was loved. "Fool!" he cursed himself.

"Let me be in time!" he pleaded for the second time that day, his hands quickly slipping into the familiar meld position. "My mind to your mind..." he began, chanting the ancient words of sunlight and sorcery, friendship and fate.

The dungeon cell faded around them, and the stars in the crisp, black sea winked out one by one, but they never noticed....



# THE FIRST PAYMENT

*Art: Merle Decker*

*By: Ginna LaCroix*

Kirk: What I have done, I had to do.

Sarek: At what cost? Your ship, your son...

Kirk: If I hadn't tried, the cost would have  
been my soul.

The Human presented a weary figure as he trudged alone along the well worn path leading to Mount Seleya. The occasional Vulcan who passed him glanced his way but none spoke, not even those who recognized him. The expression on James T. Kirk's face warned them all to keep their distance.

Until just a short time before, he had not thought of what the future might hold. He had not dared to think. If he had, he knew he might not have followed the course that had brought him to retrace his steps back to the place where Spock had been given a new chance for life.

For a moment he stopped and looked at his right arm, staring at the place where Spock's hand had rested, warm and strong -- alive -- for too short a time. They had had not time to be alone together, no time to talk. Everyone else was too excited, everyone else had needs that had to be fulfilled. So, as always, he had given. This time he had given them what he had so badly wanted himself -- time with Spock.

Then the moment came. Spock had stood before him, silent, compassionate, understanding as perhaps none of the others could, what Genesis had cost. Sarek had understood the loss of a son, but even he phrased Kirk's loss in the correct order -- he had named the Enterprise first.



"I had no choice," Kirk said softly to Spock, his throat dry and raspy.

It was then that Spock reached out. It was then that Kirk knew he was going to cry. It was then that they took Spock away.

"The healers must see to him, Kirk," said Sarek quietly, but oddly ignoring Spock as if he wasn't there, or unable to comprehend his words. "The possibility of damage... the chance to study such a phenomenon..."

Kirk's eyes darted to Sarek's face, deepening to pools of brown as anger started to replace grief. "Spock is normal, sir," he started.

"You wish him to be normal," said Sarek, unmoved by the Human's anger, "and so do I. But I am a Vulcan, Admiral, so I cannot go by assumption. Facts alone will tell me what I must accept as reality."

Kirk looked over at Spock who was staring at his father with a puzzled frown on his face. "Oh, god." thought Kirk with sudden panic, "does Sarek know something I don't?" He gave Spock's hand a gentle squeeze, then tried to free his arm. Gradually he became aware of the pain being caused by Spock's bruising grip, a grip that had started at Sarek's words. "Damn, he's as scared as a little kid!" realized Kirk. He looked at Sarek, fighting to keep his voice calm in order not to frighten Spock further. "I'll go with him."

"That is not possible," said Sarek firmly. He turned to Spock. "They are waiting." His eyes held his son's until at last Spock let go of Kirk's arm. Kirk watched helplessly as Spock left with Sarek and the other Vulcan officials, then looked around. He needed somebody to talk to, to be with. Everything was starting to crumble.

"Admiral?"

He turned to see Saavik quietly entering the room, and almost laughed out loud. The Vulcan/Romulan officer was the last person he would have looked to for help. Stifling the insane urge to giggle, he put on his best command expression, noting Saavik's hesitant approach. "What can I do for you Lieutenant?" he asked.

Saavik looked down at her feet for a minute, then bit her lip. "Captain Spock said I should apologize to you." she said softly.

Kirk glanced around the elegantly decorated room, one of many in Sarek's home. "Lieutenant, would you mind if I sat down while we talked?"

Saavik looked at him sharply, seeming to take in for the first time the exhaustion that marked his face, as well as the fresh cuts and bruises. "Do you require assistance?" she asked quickly.

Kirk smiled a little. "Very much, but not in the way I think you mean." He eased himself into a chair, then looked back at Saavik. "Would you care to sit?" he asked.

"I think not," said Saavik.

Kirk sighed. He had run into this stiff-backed posture with Saavik before, and wasn't in the mood for her Vulcan lack of comprehension concerning Human manners. "Well, why the apology?" he asked, returning to her original subject.

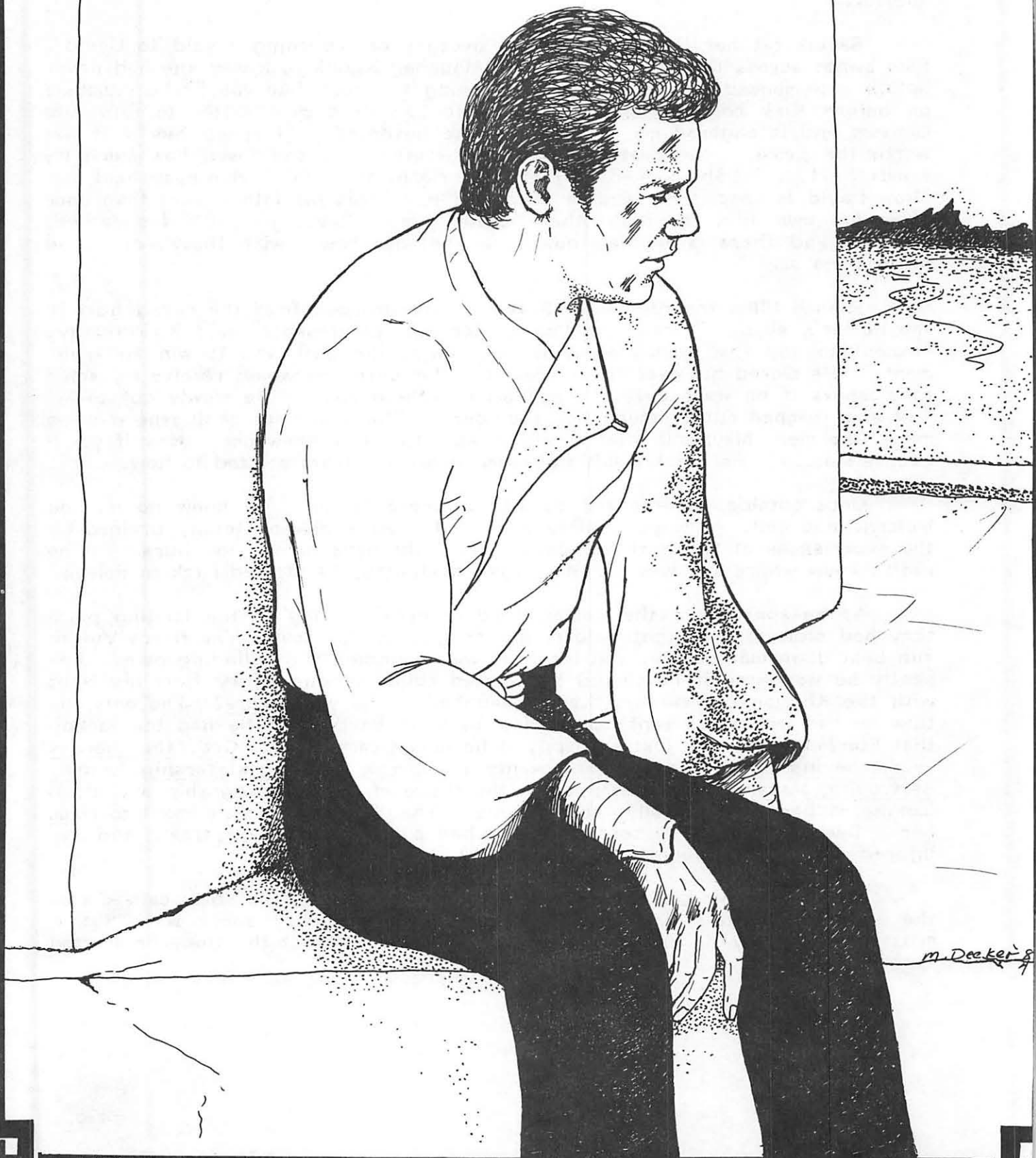
Saavik bit her lip again. "It is because of something I said to David." Pain swept across Kirk's face, pain that touched Saavik in a way she had never before experienced. "I accused him of being too much like you," she stumbled on before Kirk could interrupt her. "He had used protomatter to formulate Genesis and it angered me..." Again she hesitated. "I asked him if it was worth the price... the death." Her eyes closed. "I could see how much my words hurt..." She looked at Kirk. "I meant them to." Her eyes held his. "Now David is dead. He died in the way I have seen his father more than once offer his own life, so that others could live. David was like his father, Admiral, and there is no way now I can tell him how I wish those words had never been said."

Silence filled the room until Saavik's gaze dropped from the naked hurt in the Human's eyes. "I can give you no comfort, Lieutenant," said Kirk finally, "except to say that being blunt is not always the best way to win an argument." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm sure you would receive my son's forgiveness if he were here. I can offer nothing else." He slowly got to his feet and reached out to touch her shoulder. "Thank you for saying he was too much like me. Maybe in that I will be able to feel I knew him. Now if you'll excuse me..." He quickly left the room before his tears started to flow.

Once outside, he realized he had nowhere to go. He knew no one on Vulcan, not well, anyway. McCoy was in the house asleep, totally drained by the experiences of the past few days. He might have turned to Uhura, but he didn't know where she was so, after some hesitation, he started back to Seleya.

As he approached the Vulcan 'bird of prey' resting in the landing place they had come to the night before, he stripped off his coat. The fierce Vulcan sun beat down mercilessly, and his head was pounding with blinding pain. Absently he wondered if he should be worried about serious injury from his fight with the Klingon commander, then he laughed. Who would care? The only future he had was a life sentence waiting back on Earth, and he had the feeling that Starfleet would be just as happy if he never came back. God, the charges -- disobeying direct orders, engineering a jailbreak, stealing a starship... hell, destroying a starship! He stopped in the shade of the menacing ship and stood looking at her. Technically, she was his. The Klingons weren't about to claim her. Deep in Federation territory, she had clearly broken the treaty and any injured claim to her would acknowledge that.

He dropped his coat into the dirt, then looked up at the steps carved into the stone of Seleya. Last night there was nothing else; Spock was all that mattered. Now he no longer knew what mattered. Without thinking, he started towards the stairs.



m. Decker 8/7

It was a long climb and it was hot. Twice he found himself on his hands and knees without any clear idea of how he had fallen. He forced himself up and continued climbing. Then ahead of him was the same scene that had greeted him so eerily the night before, only now the daylight was blinding in its starkness, and the tableau was empty of the previous night's characters.

He made his way to the slab where they had placed Spock's living body and slumped down beside it. "God, let him be whole," he breathed. "Nothing else matters but him. At least let this senseless fiasco have some meaning!"

Gradually he became aware of the pain where his back was pressing against the platform. More damage from the fight. He pushed himself away, his gaze falling on his bruised and grazed knuckles, then going to the blood that was caked on the sleeve of his grime-encrusted shirt.

"You are in pain," came a voice that was startling in its familiarity, even though he had heard it only briefly once before. T'Lar.

"I'm all right," said Kirk as he struggled to get to his feet, only to find his legs refused to obey his desperate command to support him.

"I speak of what is in your mind, Kirk," came the same emotionless voice. "What is of the body does not concern me." She stood looking down at him, not seeming to notice his unsuccessful attempt to rise. "I watched your return to Seleya. It was a difficult journey for you."

"I had nowhere else to go," said Kirk quietly as he slowly sank back against the platform, admitting to his weakness, admitting to himself the hopeless situation he was in.

"Sarek has not made you welcome?"

"No... yes... he took Spock away!" Kirk looked up at T'Lar. "Why can't any of you understand?"

"What love will drive a man to do?" asked T'Lar. Kirk stared at her. "All that Spock is has passed through me, Kirk. All that he knows, all that he feels is now a part of me."

"You call it love," said Kirk. "I called it loyalty, a responsibility."

"Yes, a man would. The word scares most, perhaps Vulcans most of all, yet you have not held this back from Spock, nor he from you..."

"I thought he was dead," said Kirk softly.

"Now he lives, and still you are in pain."

Kirk nodded. "Spock is the only thing I haven't lost." He buried his face in his hands. "Oh God, why did David have to be so rash, so much like me? He didn't even know how to defend himself properly, much less anyone else..."

"Your son is not your primary pain, Kirk, and there is guilt in you because of it."

Kirk wiped a hand across his forehead, and his tired, sorrow-filled eyes met T'Lar's. "I knew the Enterprise so much longer than I did David." His eyes filled with tears. "I destroyed her. I didn't give her a chance. I didn't have time to know David, but he was my flesh and blood -- my seed brought him into existence. How can I defend loving a starship more than a son?" He dropped his gaze to the ground. "He gave his life so others could live..."

"As did the Enterprise," said T'Lar.

"What?"

T'Lar raised an eyebrow slightly. "Am I wrong?"

"I blew her up," said Kirk shortly.

"You are still alive," said T'Lar. "Would you and your friends have survived if you had not taken such an extreme action?"

Kirk stared straight ahead, seeing once more his gallant lady as she streaked across the sky above Genesis, burning like a comet through the atmosphere, taking with her the Klingon crew. "I had not thought of it that way," he said finally, his voice no more than a whisper. He looked up at T'Lar again. "Then it's all right to grieve..."

"For both of them," she said.



"Admiral?" A hand was shaking Kirk's shoulder gently. He looked up to Uhura kneeling beside him, worry filling her soft brown eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

"Spock is not the only one who knows you well," said Uhura simply.

Kirk looked around. "Where's T'Lar?"

Uhura stared at him. "There was no one else here besides you."

Kirk looked back at her, a trace of fear in his eyes. "She was here."

Uhura took one of his hands in hers. "Maybe in a way she was," she agreed. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Pour out my soul? You've been talking to McCoy."

Uhura smiled. "It's what he'd recommend if he were here."

"We'd better get back," said Kirk as he started to get to his feet.

"Spock's not back yet. It's quieter here."

Kirk stopped on his knees and looked at her. "You're running too, aren't you?"

She nodded. "We all are, from what's happened, from what's going to happen." She reached out an arm and put it around Kirk's shoulder, gently guiding him down beside her. "Tell me what happened..."

Kirk allowed himself to be pulled into Uhura's embrace, no longer having any desire to appear strong, no longer caring about his 'image.' "Carol had David for twenty-two years," he said in a low voice. "She said she didn't want him to know I was his father because she wanted him alive and safe in her world, not dead in mine."

"You can't change what happened," said Uhura softly, "and you are not seeing what Carol Marcus neglected to tell you. David was your son in all the ways that scared her. He was stubborn, independent, curious, ambitious... She ran from that once before, knowing what could happen if she had tried to hold on. He was hers only because he never met that other side of himself. Then he did..."

"And now he's dead," said Kirk bitterly.

Uhura nodded, her eyes full of tears at the sight of Kirk's suffering. "Were it not for him, Spock might have died a second time -- a final death. He gave his life willingly so the others would live. He gave you the time you needed..."

"To destroy my ship! Oh god," said Kirk, finally giving in to the desperate grief that held him. "Why does everything around me always have to be destroyed so I can go on living? Why?"

"Not everything," said Uhura, hugging him close. "Spock's still here; I'm here. Hang onto that reality, oh, please hang on!" She felt the tears start down her own face at the aching vulnerability of the man she held in her arms, a man she had loved for as long as she could remember, a man who was now hurting almost beyond help.



The sun was starting to fall behind the mountains before they were ready to leave. Kirk's face was wet with tears, as was Uhura's. T'Lar, or the vision that was T'Lar, had told him it was all right to grieve, and he had in a way he had never done before in his life. In the safety and softness of a woman's arms, he had cried.

"I have an aircar below," said Uhura. "Do you think you can make it that far?"



"I'll try," said Kirk, "but I'm not promising anything."

Uhura smiled. "I've known you for what seems forever, and this is the first time you've ever openly admitted that you could be human."

"Not only am I human," said Kirk grimly, "but I have more frailties than most."

"I doubt that," said Uhura as she helped him to his feet, "but even if it's true, no one will ever hear it from me. What has taken place on Mount Seleya will stay on Mount Seleya." She brushed the remaining wetness from Kirk's face. "Men without frailties don't cause others to care so deeply for them; they wouldn't hurt as you do now."

"Thank you," said Kirk.

"Anytime," answered Uhura, her voice not completely steady.



Sarek was waiting for them when they returned to the large house. Kirk vaguely noticed that Uhura's easy familiarity vanished in the Ambassador's presence. Once again he was the Admiral, she a Commander. He wanted to reach out to her and ask the friend to stay, but he had run out of strength. And, before Sarek of Vulcan, he had to remain strong.

"Kirk," said Sarek, obviously a little annoyed, "you had us concerned by your absence."

"How's Spock?" asked Kirk, not acknowledging Sarek's reproof, nor offering any excuse for his disappearance.

"He is resting, as you should be," said Sarek, his eyes taking in the dirty, bloody shirt that had previously been hidden under Kirk's coat. He also noted Kirk's unsteady walk, even with Uhura's unobtrusive hand under Kirk's elbow. "Do you require assistance?" he asked.

"No," said Kirk shortly, then he turned to Uhura. "Thank you," he said with a small smile. "I think I'd better try to get some sleep."

Sarek said nothing further, but started to follow Kirk up the stairs. He motioned Uhura to stay back which she did reluctantly, and with an angry glare which Sarek did not seem to notice. Then Kirk staggered and almost lost his footing.

"Ambassador!" Uhura's fierce whisper sounded from behind the Vulcan.

"He is a strong man," said Sarek evenly, without looking around. "He would not willingly receive my aid..."

Uhura grabbed Sarek's arm. "He is a beaten man!" she said fiercely, "a man who has given up everything so you could have your son back! I can't believe you can be so cold as to watch him struggle like this. You know the

pain of losing a son. Kirk is going through that same pain, only he's not going to get David back. He's lost his ship; he doesn't know if he's ever going to have Spock again... You denied him the meager support I was trying to give him, and now you say he's strong enough to keep going on his own?"

Sarek stiffened at Uhura's angry words, then bowed his head. "You are right. I was treating the Admiral as I would a Vulcan. Forgive me."

"It is not my forgiveness you should be asking for," said Uhura. "My pain is unimportant compared to his."

Sarek looked at her, then walked up a couple of steps to where Kirk was resting against the wall, and put his arm around him. A moan of pain met the movement. A worried frown crossed Sarek's face. He helped Kirk to his room, carefully lowering him onto the bed. He gently took off the bloody shirt, his mouth tightening at the extensive damage that was apparent on the body underneath. "Commander, would you please stay with him while I summon a doctor? I fear he is more badly injured than he allowed me to believe earlier. I doubt that Dr. McCoy has the physical strength necessary to tend to him properly."

Uhura nodded, her anger at Sarek's treatment of Kirk still threatening to boil over. As Sarek left the room, she sat on the edge of the bed and took Kirk's scraped and bruised hands into hers. "Hold on, Jim," she said softly to the pale face and closed eyes. "Don't have brought all of us this far only to leave us. We can do little to ease your pain, but I don't know that any of us could withstand your loss. Spock was devastating enough, but you... You are the reason for us being who we are. Lose you, and..."

"The doctor is on his way," came Sarek's voice from the doorway. Uhura nodded, not taking her eyes from Kirk's face, not knowing or caring how much Sarek had overheard.



"Holy shit!" said the young doctor who arrived to examine Kirk. He was fresh to the diplomatic corp and about all he had treated previously was a case of the sniffles. "This man should be in a hospital!"

Sarek overlooked the man's outburst. "There are no hospitals on Vulcan that are equipped to aid Humans," he said patiently. "You will have to treat him here."

The doctor sucked in his breath. "Ambassador, this man has a concussion, bruises that go so deep that there is danger of internal injury, clotting..." His mediscanner whirred, "loss of kidney function..." His voice faltered. "The Starfleet facility has..."

"He stays here," said Sarek stubbornly. "There are reasons he should not be moved."

Kirk was conscious of the argument, but nothing was making any sense. He couldn't seem to be able to focus his attention on what was going on around him. He finally gave up trying.

The doctor took one of Kirk's hands from Uhura. "These will need plasti-shields," he said as he looked at the skinless knuckles. He ran his hand along Kirk's swollen throat. "Must have been one hell of a fight."

"Who said there was a fight?" asked Sarek sharply.

"Ambassador, I may be green, but I'm not stupid," said the doctor quietly. He opened his kit. "I'll do what I can, but I won't be responsible for any complications that could have been avoided if you had let me take him to a hospital."

Kirk felt himself being turned this way and that, sharp pain gradually being dulled by injections and sprays. Eventually the lights around him dimmed, and he was left alone.

He lay silent for a time, then sat up, pushing the binding covers back. He didn't want to be alone; he wanted to be with Spock. He started across the room but his legs gave out after a couple of steps and he fell. Before he crashed to the floor, strong arms caught him and gently lowered him to the cool surface. He looked up to see Spock standing over him, still dressed in the white robe he had been wearing earlier.

"You're here," he said softly. "I was coming to find you. Oh, Spock, help me. I'm so lost..."

Spock knelt down beside Kirk. "It was your pain that drew me here." His brown eyes looked puzzled. "I do not understand why this should be." His hand brushed across Kirk's face, seeking the familiar entry points. "You said the needs of the one outweighed the needs of the many. What have my needs cost you this time, my friend?"

Kirk caught hold of Spock's hand, terrified Spock would find out what that cost had been before he had time to come to grips with his own grief. "Spock, hold me?" he asked. "Please, don't ever let go."

Kirk felt Spock hesitate as the Human deliberately avoided the meld, then he reached out and drew Kirk into the shelter of his arms. "I am here," he said softly.

"Don't let go," murmured Kirk as he burrowed against the Vulcan's chest. "Don't ever let go."

"You may sleep without fear," said Spock, his voice sounding very far away.





"You have had a long and trying day, Commander," said Sarek as the door shut behind the doctor. "With the medication he was given, Kirk should sleep for many hours. May I suggest you use this time to rest yourself? He will have need of you later..."

Uhura was reluctant, but she knew Sarek was right. "A few hours, Ambassador," she said finally.

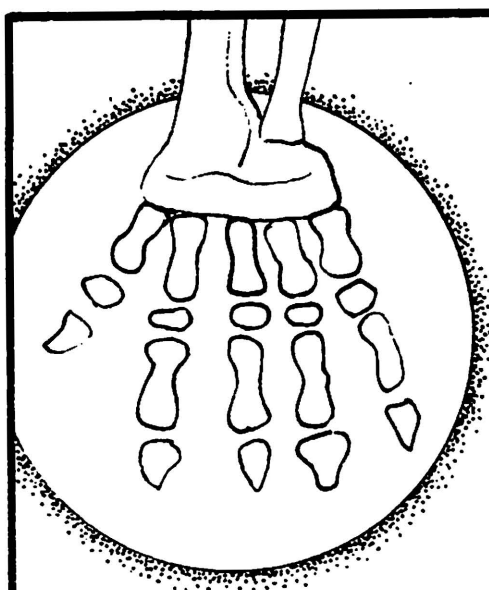
Sarek nodded. "I shall check on him until you feel fit enough to do so for yourself. Rest well."

The light in Kirk's room was dim, but not so dim that Sarek did not see Kirk curled up in the middle of the floor. The Andorian softwrap was folded around the Human almost like a cocoon. Kirk must have left his bed and an end of the wrap had caught the Human's legs and tripped him. Once on the floor, it had against wrapped itself around Kirk's now unconscious body.

Sarek carefully picked Kirk up and gently placed him on the bed, pulling the softwrap up high, making sure that arms and legs were comfortably but securely held. As he started to release Kirk's shoulders, the Human cried out in real and desperate pain.

"Spock, you said you wouldn't let go! I've lost everything else... I can't lose you again! Please, Spock!"

Sarek stood frozen. Kirk's need was genuine and immediate, and he was the only one who was there. He hesitated for a few seconds, then thought of what Spock would be sure to do in similar circumstances. Taking a deep breath, he eased down onto the bed. "I am here," he said gently, raising the Human into his arms. "I will never leave. Sleep now." He leaned back, holding Kirk securely, watching him as he drifted back into his dreamworld, back into the arms of the man he loved. Sarek would stay until Uhura came, or until it was possible for Spock to return from the healers and take his place -- to take this man and heal him as it would be possible only for Spock to heal.



Art: Caro Hedge

## LOSSES

by Cheryl Resnick

My ship destroyed,  
By my own hand.  
My son dead,  
Before I knew him.  
All for you my friend,  
my love, my t'hyla  
I would have sold my soul  
to the succubus seeking me.  
I would gladly lose all..  
give up what I've named as mine,  
Spock, none of it means anything  
Without you by my side.



# Remember

by: Laurel Ridener  
& Lynn Syck

Art: Sharon Garinger

It's all right up here,  
little bits and pieces of their lives  
safely tucked away in the treasurehouse of my mind.

Moments neither Jim nor Spock think I've seen --  
-- smiles,  
gestures,  
a frozen moment on the bridge,  
a gentle moment on the observation deck,  
wind mussing silken blondness,  
an unguarded smile touching stoic Vulcan lips --  
moments I could have missed but didn't.

I know someday I won't have them both safe within  
my reach, and then I'll unlock my treasurehouse of  
moments...

and I'll remember...







# FRIENDSHIP



*Art: Mary Mills*

*By: Donna Frost  
& Denice S. Chonka*

The tall figure walked the silent halls of the Enterprise, his footsteps the only sound in the stillness. He stopped by a door, signaling it to open and as he walked into his cabin, a shoulder brushed by a plaque on the wall -- First Officer.

Spock entered his quarters, an unfamiliar frown on the Vulcan face.

Why do I allow it to affect me so. I should know, after all this time that it will never change!

He slowly lifted his head and for a moment he regained his composure. The First Officer walked stiffly to his desk and pressed the intercom. "Spock to bridge."

"Lieutenant Edwards here, sir."

"Status, Lieutenant."

"All quiet sir. We will orbit Beta II in three point five hours."

"Very well. Inform me of any changes. Spock out."

He closed the channel and walked to his bunk, feeling the coolness of the sheets as he slipped into the first level of meditation.

Clear the mind, let the body float.

The Vulcan slipped deeper in the meditative trance, willing his body to relax. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead and he sat upright.

Illogical, ... the relaxation techniques should be working.

He ran a slightly shaking hand through his hair as he rose, eyes scanning the room, coming to rest on a small antique ship he displayed proudly on his desk. His gaze softened as he remembered the words that accompanied the birthday gift...

"... I realize you probably consider the idea of birthday gifts as... illogical, Mr. Spock", the hazel eyes lit up with affection, "but I wanted to give you this because to humans, birthdays are very special." He held out a small schooner his eyes looking at it warmly. "She's very special to me... I will always envy the old seafaring captains who could... feel the wind and smell the salt water..." He fingered it lovingly, softly murmuring, "... If only I could have been born long ago..." He sighed and looked up into the dark eyes that watched him with tenderness, and with a smile, extended his arm. "And I want you to have it for your birthday."

Spock took a breath, pulling his eyes from the ship to search Kirk's. "Jim, this ship obviously holds a great deal of sentimental value for you..." He was stopped by a raised hand. "Because it means so much to me Spock, is why I want you to have it... happy birthday, old friend."

Spock took the tiny ship gently. He looked at the human and smiled slightly. "Jim, if you had been born centuries earlier, and was captain of this seagoing vessel... I know that I would be standing beside you, also feeling the wind and smelling the salt water..."

The cabin came into focus once again. Yes, I know one person who can help.." He glanced again at the small ship, and walked through the opening doors.



James Kirk chewed irritably at the end of his stylus. "Damn pencil-pushing bureaucrats!" He pushed angrily at the pile of papers that threatened to spill from his desk. "Let them waste their time filling out all this nonsense." He pushed his chair back, and longingly eyed his bunk. "What should it be, duty or..."

His thoughts were interrupted by the door signal.

"Come." was the gruff reply.

The doors slid open and a hesitating Vulcan entered, his eyes resting on the disheveled reports. "Captain... I see you are busy, I will talk to you another..."

"No, Mr. Spock, please come in." The hazel eyes lit up -- he always enjoyed his friend's company. However, a shadow crossed the bronzed face as he noticed the Vulcan's tension as Spock crossed the room and seated himself in a chair. The dark eyes sought out the floor.

Kirk took a step towards his first officer, his eyes searching. "Mr. Spock... what's wrong?"

The pained eyes looked up and Kirk drew in a breath. What could have happened to cause the Vulcan such anguish. His memory relived recent events. As far as he could tell, everything was normal; their travels to Beta II were quiet... at times too quiet. Kirk had almost wished for a blip on the sensors. The crew was in good spirits, having returned from shore leave... even Mr. Spock had requested time on his home planet. His eyes shot back to his friend -- his home planet... could something have happened?

Kirk pulled up a chair next to his friend, trying to control the anxiety on his face. Knowing Spock as well as he did, he knew he had to give him time. Spock had come to him to talk and Kirk would have to wait until he was ready. But a small whisper escaped his lips.

"Spock, let me help... "

Spock looked up and the deep lines on his face vanished as he took a deep breath. "I just needed to... talk with someone... so I came here."

Kirk was warmed by the declaration of friendship in Spock's statement. "You can always come to me to talk, Mr. Spock... just as I've always turned to you."

Spock nodded, rose, and walked over to Kirk's book collection. He ran his hand over the covers of Jim's treasures. His captain at one time remarked on how the antique books were more pleasurable to read than the tapes used now. "I am hoping you can assist in explaining some... troubling emotions within me."

Jim sat quietly. He knew how difficult this conversation must be for Spock.

"It is illogical. It's been nineteen point five years. I cannot expect his opinion to change... but I cannot explain why, after all this time, I still feel as if I have failed him."

"Your father." Kirk murmured softly.

Spock turned around, wonder showing in the dark eyes. "You know."

Kirk rose and walked over to his first officer. He placed a hand on the lean shoulder. "I... suspected, since you recently returned from your home planet. Besides, I could always sense a strain between you and Sarek."

Spock sighed. "When I was growing up, my father wanted me to follow his career choice. Mother told me he was very proud of me and I was able to sense his pride, though he never verbally expressed this. Amanda always

voiced father's feelings." Spock hesitated, seeking to collect his thoughts. "Then I announced my intention to join Starfleet -- tried to explain my fascination with space exploration... Mother was enthusiastic -- I think she had always loved the stars. But Father only returned my statement with... a dark stare. To this day I can still see that look... and I am no longer able to sense his pride."

Kirk was stunned. "... But Spock, you're the best first officer in the fleet... surely your father must feel tremendous pride in what you have accomplished."

"I don't think so Captain, I believe Sarek bases my failure on my heritage."

Kirk took a breath. "No, surely you can't mean that."

The Vulcan nodded, "He bases my illogical decision on my human emotions... a Vulcan would have never disobeyed his father's wishes."

"Disobeyed... but Spock, surely your father couldn't dictate your life's career."

Spock walked over to Kirk's viewscreen and watched the changing star patterns. "Sarek is unable to feel pride for a son who was insubordinate... especially one he doesn't consider a Vulcan."

Kirk was stunned. He knew Spock never felt completely at ease around humans, now Spock was saying he does not feel he has a place in his Vulcan world.

His friend continued watching the stars. "While on shore leave, whenever I talked about the subject of Starfleet, Mother expressed interest... but Father remained silent."

Kirk stood up and walked to his first officer. He placed his hands on Spock's shoulders and faced him squarely. "Spock," he whispered gently, "Your father couldn't harbor any ill feelings towards your terran heritage." He smiled slightly, "After all, he did marry a human and I assume he loves your mother very much."

Spock frowned, "That possibility had entered my mind but... " He shook his head, "What else would explain my father's loss of pride?"

Kirk chewed on his lower lip. Was it possible that all parents were similar, whether they were human or Vulcan...

"Mr. Spock," he guided his friend over to a chair. An incident... similar to yours occurred to me. Perhaps relaying my story will somehow enable you to understand your own conflicting feelings."

Kirk leaned back in his seat, taking a few moments to collect his thoughts, reliving past memories. "My father was an officer in Starfleet, a man who I barely saw, except for shore leave, but one whom I loved and admired greatly." A smile appeared. "I shared his love for the stars and could sit and



listen for hours about his travels through space. It was then that I knew my career choice would be Starfleet." He stood up, casually running his hand over the top of his desk. "My mother disapproved... she wanted me to take an active interest in the farm, instead of choosing the dangerous life of a ship's officer." He gazed fondly out his viewscreen. "But I had already known where my heart was." He was silent a few moments, sadness evident on his face. "I remember the day I told Mother of my intentions -- the hurt expression." He closed his eyes. "Not long after that Father was killed on a mission and my mother was devastated. What hurt her more was my refusal to change my mind. Father would have understood... but not Mom. That was when I saw the pride leave her eyes." He ran a hand through his tousled hair. "It hurt... hurt like hell, not having Mom's approval... but I could not let it affect my choice. I'll never forget the look on her face when I left the farm to enter the Academy, suitcases in hand... I felt as if I had let her down." He rubbed his eyes, falling silent a moment.

Kirk rose and walked over to his friend. "But you see, much as Mother disagreed with my career choice... she was able to admit later that she was very proud of the officer I had become." He smiled softly. "So, my point is... parents can feel tremendous pride in their children, though they may have initially disagreed with that child's decision."

"So what you're saying Captain, is that my father may still feel, may never have stopped... feeling proud."

Kirk nodded, a smile playing around his lips. "Yes Mr. Spock, and from personally knowing a Vulcan, I'm confident that your father's refusal to admit his feeling can be narrowed down to one very human emotion -- stubbornness."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Indeed." Then his eyes took on a thoughtful look. "... And all this time I thought it was my human half."

The pained expression returned to Kirk's face. How could someone have lived with such inner torture -- all this time -- punishing himself... with no reason. The Vulcan was a very special person. He meant more to Kirk than could be imagined. It was once said that friendship could be defined as one soul in two bodies... how true. Spock's heritage had made him a unique individual, someone who was blessed with two extraordinary cultures. How could he convey this thought to his friend?

"Mr. Spock, your dual heritage has been, and is, an asset to your personality... you've got the best of both cultures, your father's analytical mind and your mother's compassion. You are a special being, my friend..." His eyes dropped as he thought of the right words, then returned bright and earnest... "Why fight so hard to be part of only one world... when you can be the best of both!"

"I understand, Jim," came the soft reply. "And I will find my place in this world... as long as you are here to help me along the way..."

Kirk was warmed by the Vulcan's open expression of friendship and clasped the other's hand. "I will help, old friend... I swear, I always will..."





# REFLECTIONS

## Part I

"No -- I'll do it.  
Give me your phaser."

\*\*\*\*\*

I was the logical one to go.  
He had no military training.  
He knew it; I knew it.  
Yet he needed to face the enemy.

Was he what humans call a martyr --  
Burdened by that emotion known as guilt?  
When I confronted him with the truth,  
Did I motivate him to self-sacrifice?

Like his father, like all humans,  
He was flawed -- impatient, unethical.  
Unknowingly, he brought grief to many  
Through his lack of judgment.

A mistake worth dying for? Perhaps.  
He took the knife intended for me.  
Driven by... altruism? Atonement?  
I cannot know, but he gave his life  
Willingly, to win us a reprieve.

Like my teacher, he valued our lives  
Beyond the needs of the one,  
And he became yet another victim  
Of the Genesis maelstrom.

I know it is illogical, but...  
I confess that I will miss him.

By: Debbie Gilbert  
Art: Caren Parnes

# on a death

## PART II

"... I'm proud, Very proud,  
To be your son."

\*\*\*\*\*

We never had any of those things --  
Friendship, camaraderie, love --  
That fathers and sons ought to have;  
I had hoped someday we might.

Naive, I clung to my fantasy  
Of a time when things would change:  
He and I would sit down, have drinks,  
And talk long into the night.

He'd tell me about his research,  
Then I'd boast about my exploits,  
And once he had accepted me,  
I would lay bare the truth.

I'd explain why I didn't stay --  
Why I couldn't be his father,  
Not until now. I'd apologize,  
But he'd smile: "Let's forget it."

He lived and died a stranger to me.  
What were his first words spoken?  
What were his likes and dislikes?  
Where did he train for his career?

The void he left gapes even wider  
With no memories to fill it up.  
I lost something I didn't know I had,  
And realize now how badly I wanted it.

My son... I never knew him, and yet  
I miss him, more than I can say.



# THE FINEST GIFT

*Art: Sharon Garinger*

*By: Suzanne Fine*

He stepped outside the tent, thankful for the slight breeze that stirred the hot, moist air. On the eastern horizon just above the jagged peaks of the Honahari range, Sidus, the largest of the three moons, rose lazily in the sky, its blood-red face foretelling still warmer weather. He breathed deeply, as though trying to substitute quantity for quality.

A vonkrit scurried past him on its way to the sanctuary of the woods, startling him momentarily. His eyes traveled automatically toward the source of the disturbance, and he caught sight of a familiar figure coming from the Chieftain's tent -- a familiar face -- yet like himself, uniquely out of place. He started across the compound, waving his arms above his head.

"Hey, Briggs! Wait up!"

Briggs turned around, stopping to allow him to catch up. His face remained impassive, almost grim. Thus, the answer had been demonstrated before the question had ever been posed.

"Bad news? They didn't go for it, did they?"

Briggs shook his head slowly. "No. Thaarn won't even consider it. Did you expect him to?"

The two men began their walk toward the fountain, a natural spring at the left side of the encampment.

"No, I suppose not. But I thought the nine Suta-chiefs would persuade him. Euthanasia isn't the most popular system with all of them."

"Well, old habits die hard... by the way, how is Lysithia?"

"She's mean and nasty -- in other words, better. The fever broke last night and she's been bellowing for the lower-status women to wait on her all day." He smiled wryly, dipping his hands into the cool water and splashing his face vigorously.

Briggs flexed his muscles tiredly, then took a deep draught of the water. "Man that tastes good on a scorcher like today." He eyed his companion decisively, "Captain says we pull out." he said quickly.

The other stopped dead, visibly tensing. "What? All of us?"

"Just the medical team. That was the deal with Starfleet -- now, look, Leonard; don't start. I know you had your heart set on that hospital, we all did..."

"Jesus, Hank! We were just getting our foot in the door here! Do you have any idea what we could do for the infant mortality rate? For the black fever outbreaks?"

"Of course I do. But it could be decades before our help would be accepted. And Starfleet doesn't feel that's an efficient motive." His words were laced with bitterness. The filth and ignorance around them angered him as much as it did Leonard McCoy, but the higher-ups did not see it that way. The medical team was not considered an "indispensable" asset to the expedition.

"How soon?" McCoy asked.

"According to Captain Bassetti, we're to have our equipment packed and ready to ship out in three weeks."

Blue eyes flashed belligerently as Leonard McCoy turned in the direction of the Base tent.

"Hey you're not going to argue the situation with Bassetti, are you?"

"You bet your ass I am!" he threw back, stalking purposefully away from his colleague.



"Yahh! I should have you flayed, McCoy. Take care in your handling of an old woman!" Lysithia growled at the young doctor in her most authoritative voice, muttering angrily under her breath about his unusual roughness in pulling her to her feet.

McCoy checked himself, realizing he was in all probability reacting to the earlier tete-a-tete with the Captain. He should have known better than to argue the point, for Bassetti's mind had been made up. McCoy had been called on the carpet for insubordination. He was lucky to have escaped being put on report. Gently, he helped the cantankerous Lysithia to her settee.



"What concerns you, McCoy?" demanded the old woman.

He affected his best country charm. "Who, me? What makes you say that?"

She narrowed her beady eyes at him. "Something ails you. You are too quiet."

"Just the heat, Ma'am. Did you take your pill today?" he ventured, escaping the conversation at large.

"Bah! They accomplish nothing. Your potions do not sustain me." She waved him away belligerently.

"The medicine won't help you unless you take it. Here -- take one now -- or shall I call your son?" McCoy opened the vial and pushed the tiny blue tablet at Lysithia. Grudgingly, the woman accepted it, eyeing McCoy contemptably. "You bully me, McCoy. When I am well, I shall have you soundly thrashed!"

"Fair enough," he smiled, "But in the mean time, listen to your doctor and take those pills!"

He opened the tent flap and left his vitriolic patient to her rumblings. She was his first real triumph here -- the first victim of black fever the Capellans had allowed him to treat. This was entirely due to the fact that Lysithia was somewhat of a revered personage, an enigma -- for women were little more than chattel under most situations. Lysithia had a colorful past; she and her husband -- the last high Chief of the ten tribes -- had done in one lifetime that which had never before been accomplished: they had united the scattered groups under one head and cleared the way to planetary unity. Together (for Parnek had made her legally his equal) they ruled as high Teer-an. When the aged Parnek became ill, the new Teer had killed him honorably. Lysithia and her son had been spared, for Thaarn had no offspring, and took the boy as his own. Though Lysithia had been granted amnesty, her two daughters had been eliminated. It was a small price to pay to preserve the life of her son, and she had felt great pride at Deerra's and Brosek's ultimate sacrifice. Later, when Thaarn took a wife who bore him heirs, the boy was given family status as a nephew.

A few yards from the tent, McCoy suddenly sensed a presence about him in the sultry night. He tensed, ready to whirl about when strong arms entwined about his neck, holding him paralyzed. He managed to plant a foot behind the ankle of his attacker, and with a mighty lurch, somehow dislodged that stout leg for a brief moment and displaced the other's weight onto his own back, rolling the body over his shoulder.

"Well done, Le'nard! You are a fine pupil!"

McCoy stood panting, peering through the darkness at the assailant at his feet.



"Jaha'an," McCoy gasped, "I wish you'd cut this nonsense out. You damn near scared the life out of me!"

Jaha'an rose to his feet -- and rose. His seven foot frame loomed above McCoy's six-foot one. "But how else will you learn the skills of men? Without them, you would be useless here."

"It doesn't look like that matters anymore," he found himself saying as they walked together.

"What do you mean? Come, we shall refresh ourselves at the tent of men." Jaha'an steered McCoy in the direction of distant hearty laughter.

"My superiors -- my "Chiefs" are sending me away." McCoy explained gravely.

"But why? My mother has grown quite fond of you. She will be disappointed."

"It would seem Lysithia's fondness for me is not sufficient. We failed to convince your Teer of the importance of medicine."

Jaha'an clicked his tongue. "We cannot expect you to understand our ways, Le'nard. To fall ill is shame for us, to be wounded a tragic burden. Death is not a thing to be feared as it is for your race. Forgive me, my friend, but to us, only the weak would wish to remain alive without due cause. It may not be the best way, but it is our way."

McCoy nodded soberly. "Then, you would consider me weak? And your mother?"

A thin smile crossed the lips of Jaha'an in the now doubled moonlight. "Lysithia is but a woman. As for you, I would consider you, Le'nard," he replied quietly, "my friend."

"Touche," muttered McCoy. "Although I sometimes wonder what made you choose me."

"One does not choose a friend, Le'nard. Friends are preordained, and it is only left for them to meet. Come, we are here."

Jaha'an drew back the opening of the tent of men, the Capellan variety of the corner bar back on Earth. McCoy entered at the same moment as Jaha'an, standing straight beside the warrior, eyes ahead. He knew as long as he kept his mouth shut, he would remain under Jaha'an's protection as his guest and brother.

The din subsided, as the Capellans turned to study the "frail Earthman", then it rose back to normal pitch when they encountered the hawkish gaze of Jaha'an hel-Parnek. Previous diversions were resumed, and McCoy breathed a sigh of relief as they remained unmolested, though he knew the apparent lack of interest was the biggest insult of all. Jaha'an with his pet Earthman.



Jaha'an ordered two tankards of ka, placing a few small rectangles of crystal currency on the sideboard. The serving girl brought the drinks promptly, and Jaha'an motioned for McCoy to seat himself beside him on the animal skin throw.

"I think I'm a little out of place here, McCoy whispered, catching the furtive glances aimed their way.

"They will accept," was Jaha'an's curt reply. "It would not be courteous otherwise. Or healthy."

He drank from the steaming cup, feeling its alcoholic effect, intensified by the heating. McCoy wondered why in the name of all that was holy anyone would want to heat a drink in weather like this. Perhaps it was another form of proving oneself. "Ah, Le'nard," signed Jaha'an, as though reading McCoy's thoughts. "Though you would be sorely missed, perhaps it would be better for you to return to the sky. We cannot change what we are, no more than you. What you want is not sensible to us."

McCoy sipped his own ka. He knew his big friend was correct; the Medical compliment of the USS Crockett was merely tolerated here. Only his unwonted relationship with Jaha'an and his esteemed mother had been the catalyst for his success, and even that was met with hesitant approval. Jaha'an was different, no -- exceptional -- among Capellans. Intelligent, yet a bit naive, he had a mind of his own. He had set that mind to the acceptance of Leonard McCoy, daring all others to challenge the decision. No one had, of course, but Jaha'an was politely ostricized for that indiscretion.

They finished their ka, polished off another round -- and another -- before they decided they had become sufficiently tight; stumbling out into the night air to retire to their respective tents.

"Is well, well indeed," slurred Jaha'an. "My friend Le'nard, you would most certainly find our world to be less than home. Yet, I had hoped you would be here for my Rite of Passage."

"Huh?"

"The reason we camp here every fifth summer. It is my season to complete the ritual. Only then will I be considered a true warrior."

McCoy burped quietly. "But, I thought you already were. A warrior, I mean. You told me you were accepted as a man three years ago."

"Ah. But not as a warrior with honor. True, I had killed in battle six times before my seventeenth year, and won the Challenge of Matrimony; but it still remains for me to endure Daranhal."

"Hmmm. When will that be?"

"When I know that the time is right." Jaha'an paused, raising his sights to the now triple-mooned sky. "Yes... and that time has come. I am sure of it. Tomorrow I will call a Kiraye, and inform the elders."

McCoy nodded approvingly. "Good. I'm proud of you, Jaha'an." He reached up and slapped the tall man on the back heartily. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I shall go to my tent and fall on my face for the night."

"No -- wait." said Jaha'an suddenly. "I will call the Kiraye this night -- this minute!"

McCoy pouted his lip out, scrutinizing his big friend in the dim light. "You sure you don't want to wait til morning?"

Jaha'an's answer was to stride purposefully toward a metal slab that was placed in the center of the encampment and strike it soundly with the heel of his hand, producing a surprisingly clear peal. Three times he repeated the act, and shortly curious tribespeople began to gather.

"I call Kiraye," he announced loudly. "I ask Witness and Sanction."

At the mention of the Kiraye, a small boy turned and ran to the various tents of the elders, proclaiming a single phrase inside each. Soon, the meeting circle began to fill out, and several brought torches to form the bonfire. McCoy noticed his own fellow officers had appeared as well, and had not been turned away. He realized the children present were all male and there were no women, not even the illustrious Lysithia -- Jaha'an's mother -- and sole woman of male status.

"Speak," said the Chief of the tribe of Parnek. "Why do you call the Kiraye?"

"I petition for Rite of Passage." was Jaha'an's respectful reply.

"And what calls you to Daranhal this night?"

"The night itself, calling to my soul."

The Chief nodded, expressionless. The First elder then spoke. "Who denies this?"

McCoy studied the faces of those around him. He silently hoped that his kinship with Jaha'an would foster no opposition on the part of the disapproving Capellans. No one spoke.

The elder waited a reasonable period and spoke again. "Who will witness the Daranhal of Jaha'an hel Parnek?"

Again, the stillness of the night answered the inquiry.

"Will no one witness with Son of Parnek?" pressed the official.

McCoy noted the brief flash of dejection in the eyes of his comrade.

"Without witness, there will be no Daranhal." said the Chief flatly.

McCoy looked about darkly. So that's their game, he thought. Make a fool of Jaha'an.

He stepped slowly through the close-knit group toward Jaha'an. "I will witness." he declared.

A muttering rose among the Capellans. McCoy made out the face of his superior, Captain Bassetti, whose expression stiffened considerably.

The elders began to rumble amongst themselves, shaking their heads in a negative fashion. Jaha'an raised his outstretched hand.

"Is McCoy not a man?" he challenged. "Are not even the striplings among us eligible to witness?"

"What is his worth to us?" The Chief half scoffed.

Jaha'an ignored the implication. "He is my friend. His blood flows as my brother."

A hush fell across the gathering. At last, the softened tone of the Chief spoke: "Then he will be honored among us as well."

The elders stood as one being, calling an end to the Kiraye. They left silently, followed in general by the crowd, leaving a somewhat awestruck McCoy to stand next to his friend. Soon they were joined by Captain Bassetti and Dr. Briggs.

"McCoy, what the hell have you gotten yourself into?" the Captain demanded.

"Relax, Captain. I understand the Daranhal is a simple ritual, the least dangerous of the Capellan customs. There's no blood, no fighting, just meditation. Besides, I couldn't leave Jaha'an standing there with his pants down." He exchanged prideful expressions with the Capellan. "Just how long will this take, Jaha'an?"

"About eight days," answered Jaha'an.

"Huh?" McCoy became instantly sober.

"It will take us that long to reach Honahari. Then another eight to return."

"I could have told you," Briggs said to a flabbergasted McCoy. "before you jumped in with both feet."

"Of course." extrapolated Bassetti, "This could prove very beneficial to our relations with the Capellans. But you'd better take an extra power pack for your phaser -- the wilds can be pretty vicious."

"No," insisted Jaha'an. "No fire-weapons. And no talk-boxes, either. Just the Kligat, and a knife for each of us." He placed a massive hand upon McCoy's shoulder. "You have proved to be a worthy friend, Le'nard."

McCoy smiled weakly. "What are brothers for? Besides, I could use a change of scenery, and I haven't been on a hike since I was a kid -- what could go wrong? Hey, I'd better turn in. I'll need a good night's sleep before we leave."

"No, not tomorrow." said Jaha'an. Briggs made a strangled noise.

"No?"

"No. We leave this night -- now."

"Now?" McCoy was incredulous.

"Yes. We shall rest in a while, but we must be far from this place when we do. It is the law. Come."

He drew two of the several knives he carried in his belt, gave one to McCoy, and dropped the rest at his feet. He placed the remaining knife and his Kligat back in their sheaths. Resolutely, he walked from the dwindling firelight toward the shadowy thickets of the woods.

Stupidly, McCoy followed, and behind him heard Basetti call, "Be careful, Doctor. And -- have a good trip."



He awoke suddenly to Jaha'an's proddings, foggily wondering if he were more tired, hung-over or simply aged. Having decided he was in good physical condition, aided by this planet's slightly lessened gravity, he had only been pleasantly tipsy the night before, AND he had turned 38 just six months before, he made another diagnosis. Glancing at his timepiece, he confirmed it. He had had one hour of sleep in the past 30 hours.

He rubbed his face with a dew-moistened palm, and look up, squinting against the growing dawn. "I don't suppose we could hail a taxi." he remarked dryly.

Jaha'an stared at him blankly.

"I thought not. Let's go, then." He yanked himself to his feet.

Somehow, the brisk walk through the brush refreshed him -- exhilarated him. He followed Jaha'an through the forest as the silver sunlight dappled through the many shades of green. It glistened upon moisture-laden surfaces and danced across rippled streams. There was no path that McCoy could detect, but his guide seemed confident of the course. It was not long before he realized they were walking on a gradual incline. The slow, winding ascent of Hanahari had begun.

When his legs and feet screamed for rest, he remembered the average summer day on this part of Capella was almost a sixth longer than one would be on his own world. At last Jaha'an stopped to make camp for the night.

Getting a fire started was a simple matter, for unlike flint and steel, the minerals used to strike a spark by the Capellans were of a soft, sulphurous material that ignited instantly -- much like a friction match used in past centuries on Earth. Jaha'an delegated the task of building the fire and collecting water to McCoy, and he himself went to gather what he could to feed them.

McCoy busily set about cutting branches and brushwood with the amazingly sharp knife Jaha'an had given him. The nights could be somewhat chilly, and he made sure a generous supply was harvested. He found a low-growing briar laden with translucent berries that sparkled like drops of rain suspended on the vines. He gathered a handful and put them aside for Jaha'an's inspection. A Tan-he waddled up the side of a tree, perched itself on a comfortable limb and stared down disdainfully at him with large brown eyes. He wished he were as skilled with the dagger as Jaha'an, for its meat was tasty and nourishing, and the roots and seeds that had sustained them throughout the day had been less than satisfying.

By the time that Jaha'an had returned, the sun had sunk below the trees, and the night sounds had begun to sing around them.

"Yaffa bark," announced Jaha'an proudly. "And Jemmer petals. Also, I was fortunate enough to find a hive of tree worms!"

McCoy winced, attempting to hide his displeasure at the last item on the menu. However, he resolved to eat at least a small quantity of the squirming mass of red tubes, for the protein content was exceptionally high. Besides, he did not wish to insult Jaha'an's foraging triumph. Fortunately, the training he received at Starfleet included the urging to accept all food offerings from the natives, as long as it was within safe limits. He remembered his mother admonishing him to eat what was put before him when he was a boy, but he never expected to have to adhere to those rules so many years later or this far out into space.

All things considered, "dinner" was not as bad as he imagined. The Jemmer petals were tender and sweet, the bark filling, and even the tree worms lost their undesirable texture when roasted crisply. The plaintive wail of the night-wings called out as he gazed lazily into the fire.

"Bet we'll sleep well tonight," he said. "But I'm so stiff now I wonder what I'll be like in the morning."

"Your body will loosen up." Jaha'an assured him. "In a few days, you will be as fit as any Capellan. However -- " he reached inside the folds of his cloak, "Perhaps a suitable lubricant would be of help." He produced a small leatheren flask, unstopped it, and passed it to McCoy.

Leonard McCoy sniffed the contents, and shot Jaha'an a puzzled look.

"This is ka... how could you have... we didn't have time to..." realization struck him in the face, and he pointed an accusing finger at his companion.

"Wait just one blasted minute," he said sharply. "You -- you planned this! You didn't just pull the idea out of a hat, you knew right along that I would have to witness!"

"I confess to the deception, Le'nard," Jaha'an admitted. "And I beg forgiveness. But I knew if I had confided in you beforehand that your Captain would not approve, and forbid you to go. I could have called Kiraye twice more, and on the third attempt, the elders would have appointed me a witness..."

McCoy nodded. "I understand, Jaha'an," he assured his friend. Then, inaudibly "I think." He smiled weakly, and took a long draught of the potent ka. Damned if it didn't taste better without the traditional heating, though with considerably more "kick", as the alcohol content remained intact this way. He passed the flagon back.

"I almost forgot I found these berries over beyond that tree. I was wondering if they were any good to eat."

Jaha'an studied the clear beads as they were handed to him. "I should hope you will never try to swallow them," he laughed. He placed a few onto a kerchief, and gently touched them with the tip of his blade. The berries exploded into a liquid spray, leaving a curious blacked stain on the cloth.

McCoy peered at the cloth more closely, and discovered that the darkened marks were actually acid burns, where the tiny droplets had eaten through the fabric.

His eyes widened. "Pretty potent," he remarked casually. "That'd probably do more damage to a stomach than this stuff." he raised the flask to his lips. "Cheers."

Jaha'an's face showed amusement. "And not nearly as pleasant, either," he agreed. He sat down before the fire, examining the remainder of the berries idly.

"We call them Witch's Tears," he explained. "The old women use them to make prophecies. Lysithia showed me how to read them once."

"So what the hell," McCoy drawled. "Why don't you do it?"

Jaha'an pondered it, then with brightened eyes said, "Very well."

Smoothing a section of ground out with his hand, he traced his name into the powdery earth. He then positioned seven of the Tears in a circle around that, and using the flat side of the kligat, burst them all at once with a swift motion. He studied the smouldering spatters judiciously.

"Well?" McCoy prompted.

"They say," said Jaha'an, "many fires will burn in my honor. Perhaps I will rise to high station, eh?"



"Sounds pretty good to me," said McCoy lightly. "What do they say about me?"

Jaha'an repeated the process, using McCoy's name. He examined the result, his face laced with bewilderment.

"They say that a great chief, perhaps even a Teer, will carry your name. Ah, well. It is only an old woman's game, after all."

"Now just a minute," protested McCoy with mock arrogance. "What makes you all think I won't just jump ship, marry a Capellan woman, and have a son who'll make monkeys of you all? Could happen, you know, so just watch yourself." He winked smugly.

Jaha'an pursed his lips. "Forgive me, Le'nard." he said slowly, "but what you say, even in jest, is not possible. You see, well, someone as yourself -- what I mean is, you would not be allowed to marry. You would be relegated to woman status."

Properly deflated, McCoy cocked an eyebrow and cast his eyes downward. "Oh. Well, so much for the fine art of fortune telling."



Jaha'an had been right -- soon McCoy's legs strengthened under the unceasing regiment of the journey. For three days the unrelentless heat and humidity tormented them, and even the leaves withered upon the branches. The neyan larvae huddled within the deep cool spots of the streams. The woods were devoid of the usual small animals which now sought out shady nooks and holes in the ground.

On the fourth day it rained. Flooding torrents etched into the humus, exposing sand and stone beneath the rich layers. Eventually McCoy no longer felt discomfort at being soaked, but welcomed the cool soft rain that drenched his clothes and clung to his skin. The only worry that plagued them was the problem of keeping the firestones dry.

On the morning of the sixth day, the storms had blown the stagnant air away, and the sun seemed brighter and more golden on the world. Before the morning ended they came upon a vast plain -- a desert -- that loomed before them below the final peaks of the stately Hanahari.

Jaha'an paused, taking in the barren expanse. "Ahan-karon," he spoke. "The place of the dead. It is believed all spirits come here to reside after the death of the body, to await the final passing of the last soul in the world. When all who have ever walked through life are here, then the tears they have shed will fall upon this place in one great torrent and the desert will bloom again. Life will then commence once more, on a higher existence." He started to walk again, and McCoy followed his unfaltering gait. "When will the last soul come?" the doctor asked cautiously.

"No one knows. That is why we do not fear death as you, Le'nard. To us, death is but a step closer to the better world. When one dies, another takes his place; life follows death, death follows life. The circle continues, but is not endless."

"But why not make the best of life in this world? Look around you, Jaha'an. Death comes soon enough, why invite it prematurely? Your world is one of the most beautiful I've seen."

"You still don't understand. We do love life -- perhaps more than you know. But death is part of life, and we love that too. This flesh, this vessel about us -- it is not important. What matters is the man inside. When I kill a man, if he dies well I feel no animosity against him, and he feels none toward me. It is the way we are."

"You're right," McCoy sighed resignedly. "I don't understand."

The endless trek over the cobbles wore heavily on McCoy's joints. His calves hurt, and the beating sun began to make him slightly dizzy. Jaha'an, he noted, seemed more suited to the ordeal, and his stoic face reflected no discomfort. In the distance, he could see the two Lower Walls of Hanahari, their white sides thrusting up around the base of the mountain.

They were three-quarters of the way along when Jaha'an abruptly stopped, freezing in his tracks.

"What's the matter? McCoy asked, bewildered.

The Capellan sniffed the air, nose wrinkling slightly. He thrust out a hand towards his companion.

McCoy inhaled deeply. There was a slight scent of ozone in the air -- perhaps an electrical storm brewing? He looked to the sky, but its pale blue color told him otherwise.

A low whining noise drifted from the west. He fought to see through the blinding sunlight, but he could detect nothing. Then briefly, there was a slight flash of light, a tiny flicker against the sandy stretch.

"It's seen us." shuddered Jaha'an.

"What's seen... " McCoy began, then saw the spark again as the object moved in front of a dark-colored boulder. He recognized the foreboding shape.

It was a power-cat, all right; he'd seen tapes of the devils, their electricity producing spines capable of immobilizing prey at less than four meters. The cat howled agitatedly.

Jaha'an's eyes darted between the animal and the bluffs, gauging the distance of each. "The ledge is 3 lignas. Do you think you can reach it before he can reach you?"

"Do we have a choice?" McCoy said incredulously.

"Go." hissed Jaha'an urgently, and McCoy sprang into a break-neck run. His muscles ached no longer as the burst of adrenalin fortified him. From the corner of his eye, he could make out the distant russed blur of the cat, still far enough away for safety, yet picking up speed. "We'd better move fast," he called without turning.

He thought his chest would burst, but he kept sensible enough to control his breathing with deep, steady, inhalations. He pushed his body further toward the sanctuary looming closer...

Yet something was amiss. He stopped short, turned, and found to his horror that Jaha'an was not behind him, had never been and was standing rigidly in the same spot as before.

McCoy stood transfixed, momentarily struck dumb by the situation. It took a few precious minutes for him to realize Jaha'an's intent -- with himself as the diversion, the Capellan would fell the cat with the kligat he held ready in his hand.

"Run, Le'nard, run!" Jaha'an was screaming at him. He pulled his wits about him hastily, and turned once more toward the cliffs.

It seemed as though he were running through viscous liquid; the interruption had slowed his pace considerably. He dared not look back again, for even if it would not have slowed him further, he was terrified at what he might see.

The white clay wall was now before him. He leaped up, grasping the network of gnarled roots desperately. His feet found places to anchor themselves as he pulled himself as best he could upward, clinging to the shoots that often times broke in his grip and grabbing others as quickly.

He could hear the cat below him, its fiendish cry intermingled with the sharp crackling of its power-spines. Sweat ran profusely down his back. Goddamn it, Jaha'an, where the devil are you, he thought as the ozone reached his nostrils. It was fortunate that the beast was a poor climber.

The piercing bellow told him that the kligat had found its target. He scrambled the remaining length up the side of the bluff, and slid about on his stomach to look below.

The cat writhed fitfully, the kligat embedded in its side. Great amounts of electric energy were released in its death throes. At last, the brilliant blue and white flashes ceased, and the animal lay motionless.

McCoy followed suit and collapsed upon the soil, rolling to his back with eyes closed. A few minutes passed before he got to his knees, watching the approach of Jaha'an. The warrior paused over the cat, retrieved his kligat, and started up the side of the ledge.

McCoy offered his hand on the final length up, pulling his friend up beside him.

"What in the name of blazes did you think you were doing?!" he said sharply. "You could have been killed if that critter had decided you tasted better than me, and had come after you instead. Then he might have had me for dessert!"

"Control yourself, Le'nard. You're upset... "

"Damn right, I'm upset!"

"Will you be silent and listen!" Jaha'an boomed. "Good. The cat will always go after a moving quarry. Had we both run for safety, my vantage point would be useless. Had we both remained, there was the chance I might have missed, and the cat would have had us both. My way, at least one of us would have survived."

McCoy shook his head in consternation, still visibly rattled. "One of these days, Jaha'an... "



"We have done well," remarked Jaha'an, tossing the vonkrit bone into the flickering campfire. "Tomorrow we should reach the top of Hanahari before nightfall. There I will let the winds of Hanasoran cleanse my soul, and feel the Knowledge of the Blood touch my mind. Le'nard, do you hear me?"

He glanced over to his friend, a smile creeping to his lips. Quietly, he rose to his feet and placed his cloak over McCoy's sleeping figure.



Leonard McCoy had never indulged in the sport of mountaineering, but now he had to admit there was a certain satisfaction involved with each progressive ascension. Below, he could make out the vast stretch of the desert, noticing that what they had crossed had been only a small extrusion of the enormous whole. To the south lay the sea, with its many tributaries emptying into it; he could make out the Canes river, which led windingly to the summer camp of Jaha'an's people.

The red color of the sea blended with the reflection of blue sky to make a deep purple hue. Jaha'an pointed to the shoreline; a herd of peacock deer galloped along the beach, brilliant blue plumage softly dancing in the wind. McCoy nodded, grinning blissfully. He felt as though the wonders of creation were being placed before him for his inspection and delight.

The sun was mid-high. He squinted upward to see the apex of Hanahari. Every 20 meters he would repeat the ritual, expecting to reach the top, and every 20 meters he found that the end result had mysteriously moved that much further away.

He paused to catch his breath -- the air was noticeably thinner. Even Jaha'an was pacing himself now.

The summit of Hanahari was reached abruptly. Its desolate surface was covered with the remains of the winter's snow. A few scraggly trees and shrubs grew in sparse fertile crevices.

McCoy dropped to his knees, struggling for air. He looked at Jaha'an, who appeared equally exhausted. "We finally made it," he gasped. "All that climbing, I didn't feel the cold before." He shivered slightly.

"There is enough wood to get a fire going," Jaha'an observed. "You will be warm tonight." He watched as the sun sank below the horizon.

"What about you?"

"I will rejoin you in the morning. Tonight, the cold will be my companion."

"But... "

Jaha'an made a slicing motion through the air with his hand. "Until the sun rises, Le'nard, you will not speak to me, nor will you touch me. Night falls. Sleep now, for I must leave you." The Capellan removed his cape and deposited it and the kligat at McCoy's feet. He walked to the eastern side, a strange distant look on his face. The wind whirled around him, wailing mournfully, blowing bits of snow upward in the draft.

Jaha'an settled himself on the ground, legs crossed, back straight. He closed his eyes, murmuring a few words McCoy could not catch. Then he removed his dagger and swiftly pierced his wrists, starting a steady flow of red that dripped upon the hoary frost.

McCoy startled, jumping toward his friend. "Jaha'an, my God... !"

"There is no danger," Jaha'an told him formally, as though speaking to a child. "This is what has always been done. Daranhal has begun -- you must leave me now." He flashed McCoy a cold stare that took him by surprise. The doctor stepped back. The Capellan's blood pressure was considerably lower than Earth standards, he knew, and the cold would check the flow to some extent; but could his brother survive an entire night? Others had done so, it would seem -- but the idea still unsettled him. He busied himself with the fire.

The night grew colder on the peak of Hanahari. McCoy shivered inside the folds of Jaha'an's cloak. The inner moon had just slipped below the horizon; its rapid orbit would bring it back in sight about noon the following day, pale and white to rival the sun. The outer moon was above him -- it would be about two in the morning by his Terran reckoning of time.

He looked once again to Jaha'an. The younger man had not moved since cutting himself. McCoy had not known what to expect, but self-mutilation was not exactly what he had imagined.

He stood up, pacing around the fire as he had done for the better part of the night. He heard a ragged moan from the dark figure sitting at the edge of the cliff, and inched closer.

Jaha'an's breathing was labored and his body shook convulsively. McCoy could see by the twin moonlight the tiny pools of congealed blood on the ground, and he was appalled to find that Jaha'an had been periodically flexing his fists and rubbing snow into his wrists to keep the flow from clotting. The Capellan's face was starkly pale in the dim glow. He swayed briefly, his eyes rolling up under his lids.

McCoy lunged forward to catch him. Unexpectedly, Jaha'an, who had previously been apparently oblivious to McCoy's presence, drew his dagger and pointed it menacingly at the doctor.

"Do not interfere, Le'nard," he said in a harsh whisper. His gaze was that of a stranger to his brother of the blood. "I cannot warn you again."



He awoke suddenly, initial disorientation soon giving way to alertness. The sun was angled at mid-morning. Precisely when he had drifted off to sleep he could not recall.

The fire had long since died, leaving ashen embers to drift in the wind. He unraveled himself from the cloak and squinted against the light of the eastern ledge. Jaha'an was not to be seen anywhere in the vicinity.

McCoy swung swiftly to his feet. "Jaha'an?" he called. No reply. "Jaha'an, where are you?" His voice echoed through the rocky peak.

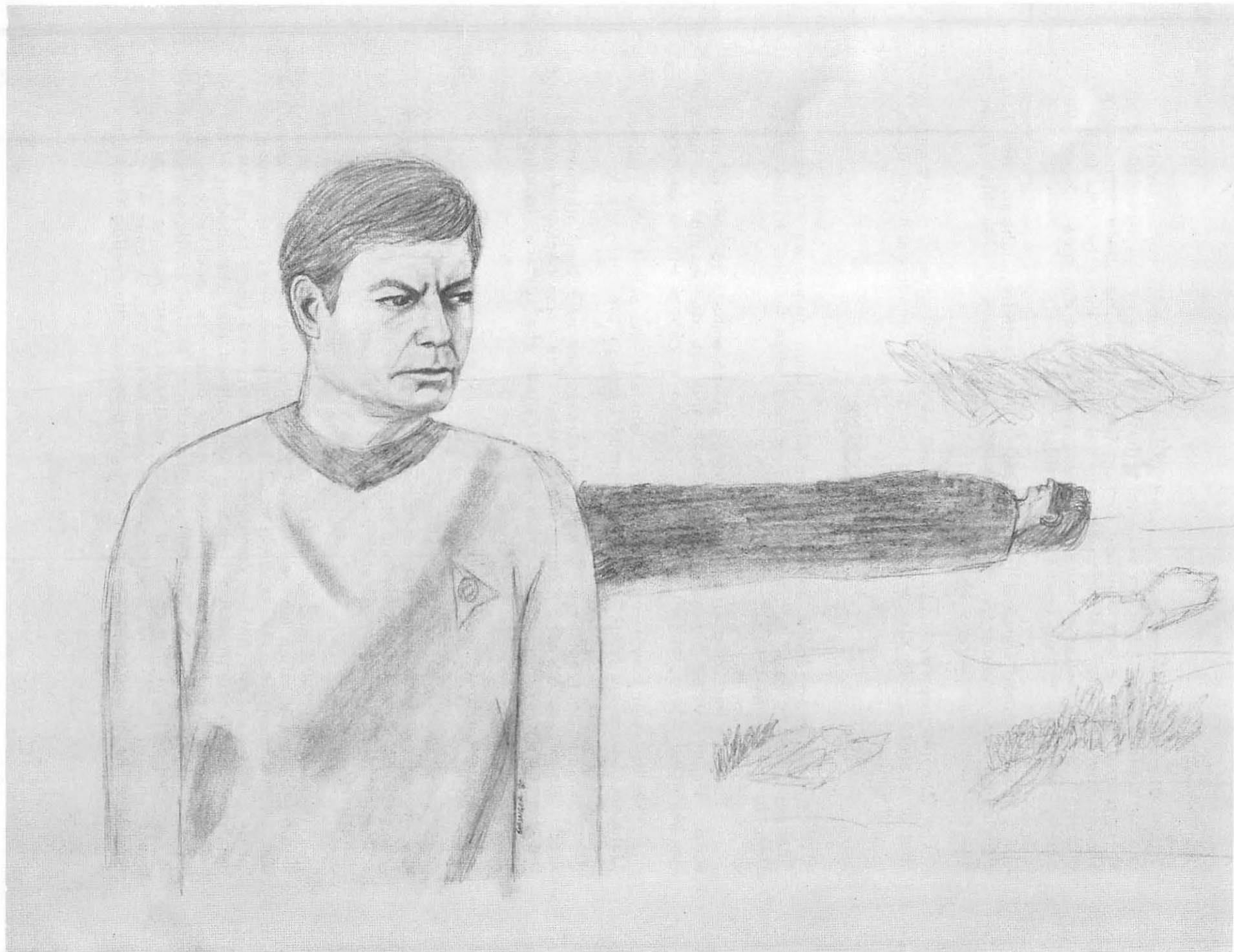
An indistinct noise, very soft, penetrated the relentless whispering wind. He cocked an ear, holding his breath. The noise beckoned again, but the direction was undetectable. His eyes scanned the surface, looking for some small clue.

Again the tiny sound drifted by.

He walked to where his instincts told him was the only possible source, and peered over the steep side of the eastern cliff. Some 10 meters below, Jaha'an hung precariously by one leg, like a broken doll. The leg was wedged at a sickening angle within a jagged overhang on the side of Hanahari.

McCoy felt the blood drain from his face. He searched wildly for a suitable handhold, then lowered himself carefully over the edge and down the face of the mountain. His medical mind could envision what had probably taken place: Jaha'an, having completed Daranhal, had risen to join McCoy at the fire. His blood pressure had been so depleted that the sudden effort of getting to his feet had caused him momentary dizziness, and he toppled over the side, to be caught in this terrifying position. McCoy shuddered to think of how long Jaha'an had remained in this agonizing trap waiting for his friend, his witness -- his brother -- to come to his aid. A pang of guilt came over him like an icy sweat, and he struggled to cast the feeling from him.





He reached Jaha'an's side and gently hefted his shoulder, and began to climb up the nearly perpendicular edifice. The mangled leg at once came loose from its ensnarement and McCoy began working his way to the top.

McCoy laid Jaha'an on the ground, and immediately placed his fingers to the common carotid. The pulse was weak, but steady. He frantically tore at the cloth surrounding the injured limb, and was sickened by what he saw. The angle of fracture told him that the tibia was broken in at least four places, and the flesh below the knee was blackened with putrefaction already.

"Jaha'an... Jaha'an, can you hear me?" McCoy urged. The Capellan reacted with an incoherent reply, shaking his head fitfully, then became still.

McCoy carefully lifted an eyelid. Unconscious. He sat back on his haunches, a knot forming in the pit of his belly. There was no alternative. If a clean, efficient hospital were within reach, repair could be made on the leg - new arteries implanted, bones reset, tissue replaced. But medical technology was kilometers away, and gangrene had already set in. He had no choice -- the infection was spreading at an alarming rate due to the accelerated Capellan physiology and the leg would have to be removed.

He touched Jaha'an's face. Sleep, my friend. He rose to gather brushwood to rekindle a sterilizing fire.



The sky began to grow dark again. McCoy dipped the cloth in the snow and replaced it to Jaha'an's face. The Capellan had mercifully not stirred during the amputation, and had remained unconscious for the rest of the day. Now he mumbled a few utterances, mostly nonsensical phrases. Twice he called out to his dead father, Parnek, once to Le'nard.

Without instruments, McCoy knew Jaha'an's blood pressure was dangerously low. He anxiously waited for Jaha'an to rouse so that a steady feeding of liquids could be started. McCoy rummaged through Jaha'an's satchel until he found the salt carried by all Capellans for seasoning. He would mix this with the water until the body could manufacture more blood.

He took Jaha'an's pulse, which had improved somewhat, thanks to the characteristic Capellan hardness. He stood up wearily and walked to the edge of the cliff, arms folded across his chest against the chill. He had to get Jaha'an off this mountain somehow. But even if he could make the long climb down without incident, how would he ever find his way back through the wilderness? Jaha'an would have to be carried the entire way, and there was no guarantee he would remain coherent enough to point them in the right direction.

The river -- perhaps that was the answer. The Canes could be reached in a day or two from here, and he could follow it back to familiar territory. That route, though longer, might be their only chance.

He heard Jaha'an cry out, and went to his side.

"Jaha'an? Lie still. You're all right now." he said softly.

"Le'nard... I... fell. Alive... "

"It'd take considerably more than this hill to finish you off. Here -- drink this." He held the flask to Jaha'an's dry lips.

Jaha'an grimaced, turning away. "Salt... "

"Yes, it'll help you retain fluids. Drink it down, then you can follow it with fresh water."

Jaha'an sipped obediently, choking more than once on the brine before McCoy was satisfied enough had been swallowed.

"Jaha'an," McCoy said carefully. "I know you consider it unmanly to admit to pain, but you must tell me when and where you're hurting. I can't help you unless you tell me."

Jaha'an nodded. "There is some... difficulty with my leg. The left one -- it throbs."

The doctor gulped nervously. "It's called phantom pain, Jaha'an. You'll feel the sensation, even years from now. I... I had to take the leg off."

Horror reflected in Jaha'an's eyes as he allowed the knowledge to penetrate. "You... should not have cut it off." he said too softly.

"It would have killed you."

"You should not have cut it off." he repeated.

"Jaha'an, listen to me. The leg can be replaced. We can give you a new one, just as good and maybe even better."

Jaha'an shook his head slowly. McCoy began to protest, but soon realized that such an operation would be impossible. There would soon be no doctors. No hospital. And no interference.

He fought to remain unperturbed. "You can learn how to get along without it, Jaha'an. You'll be just as useful as... "

Jaha'an had not been listening. He closed his eyes, saying, "You should have let me die, Le'nard. It would have been easier for both of us."

Leonard McCoy was angry. It took all his endurance to refrain from venting that anger on his friend. He had saved Jaha'an's life -- how could the man say such a callous thing? "Go to sleep," he said curtly. "Tomorrow you'll see things differently."

Jaha'an had not spoken of death again the next day. He took the water and rations McCoy offered, and doubled his strength almost overnight. The following day, McCoy announced that they would attempt a descent, with Jaha'an strapped to his back.

"It'll work," he promised. "It has to. I've got to get you back to camp, and get some antibiotics into you. There's still the danger of complications."

"If you follow the river as you propose, you can make the trip much faster alone. Leave me here, Le'nard."

"No -- by the time a rescue party could make it back, you'd never survive the elements, not to mention starvation."

"I was not speaking of a rescue. Leave me here, Le'nard -- with my knife."

McCoy felt his mouth go dry. "Get this through your head, Jaha'an," he said angrily. "I'm not leaving you behind under any circumstances. I won't allow you to take the coward's way out!"

The deliberate insult had not fazed the Capellan. "I am worse than dead," he said calmly. "I am less than a man. Let me die with dignity."

"You can live with dignity! Look... I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I'll get you that prosthesis somehow. You'll walk again, I promise!"

"It would not matter." Jaha'an replied darkly. "You cannot change the Capellan way."

Jaha'an was right, and it infuriated McCoy. Still, he would have to change Jaha'an's way of thinking and make him accept this. He picked up the leather strap that would tie them together.



If McCoy thought the climb up had been difficult, the one down was Herculean. His burden taxed his sense of balance greatly, and he had to stop periodically to check for signs of strain on the severed limb. A hot blade had served as cauterizing iron, and a tightly tied bandage held the flaps of skin in place as they fused. His handiwork was holding up well.

When they finally reached the bottom, McCoy quickly untied them both and lowered Jaha'an to the ground, collapsing next to him.

"I'd say, 'that was the hard part', but that would be like asking for trouble," he quipped.

Jaha'an grinned, not quite succeeding in masking the pain etched in his expression.

"Hurt?" McCoy inquired.

"It comes, it goes." Jaha'an paused, looking around the unfriendly terrain. "There was once a man in my tribe who lost an arm in battle. He chose to live with it. He made his way by selling bowls and pots, but no one would associate with him otherwise. He was unclean, damaged. No longer a man."

"I'd rather we didn't discuss this right now," said McCoy stiffly.

"Please, Le'nard, you must hear me. What I ask is not out of grief or hysteria. It is not uncommon, nor is it abominable to us. I ask you to kill me honorably -- let me join the desert souls. If you cannot, then give me my knife."

"Shut up," McCoy ordered. "We rest here, then I'll scout around for materials to make a suitable drag-sled. It's a long way to the river." He rolled over, careful to keep the weapons by him.



The drag-sled was no easy matter to construct, but it served its purpose well once McCoy assembled it. It was a backbreaking task, pulling the Capellan's large frame behind him through the less than ideal terrain, and he thought he would drop from exhaustion on several occasions. He gathered foodstuffs, mostly vegetable, but had been lucky enough to snare a vonkrit or two, and water was plentiful in pools and stumps after the rains.

Day by day he kept close watch on Jaha'an's progress, marveling at the rapid rate of recovery. The Capellan seemed distant, yet strangely undepressed. And he never ceased his constant preoccupation with death. That unsettled McCoy most.

"You are strong for one so small," Jaha'an teased as McCoy labored over the job of hacking the log to the proper length.

"Small!" McCoy threw back indignantly. "My dear fellow, I'll have you know where I come from I'm considered fairly tall. Now, just because Capellans are veritable giraffes..."

"What is that?"

McCoy commenced with a description of the improbable terran animal.

Jaha'an curled his lip dubiously. "A most fantastic concoction, Le'nard. I think you speak an untruth."

"Sir! Are you calling me a liar?" McCoy asked with mock disbelief.

"Were you a Capellan, you would not stand for such an accusation."

"Hmm. Were I Capellan, that would have cost you your life!"

"Exactly."

The air of lightness was gone, and McCoy did not like where the conversation was leading. He averted his eyes, awkwardly returning his attention to the task at hand.

"Le'nard?" Jaha'an prompted. "Did you hear me?"

"I hear your voice. I don't hear your words."



From the outgrowth of the tree McCoy could make out the reflection of the river about a kilometer away. He climbed down, picking up the sachel and tying it to his underbelt. Nearby, Jaha'an slept peacefully for the first time since the accident.

It was imperative they return to the encampment and begin rehabilitation as soon as possible to lift the Capellan from his suicidal mood. The destructive strain must not be allowed to incubate; Jaha'an had to come to grips with the situation. And it was McCoy's responsibility to see to it that his friend accepted life.

The Capellan stirred softly.

"Jaha'an? How are you feeling today? Here, drink." McCoy proffered the flask.

Jaha'an swallowed bitterly. "Pah! How long must I endure this brackish poison? If you truly wish to make me feel better, let me have the ka instead of this."

"I used it on your leg. Drink your water."

Jaha'an made a sour face, but obeyed. "We must be near the Canes." he remarked, sniffing the air.

"We are. I spotted it a few lignas away from here."

"Good... Le'nard?"

"Yes?"

"Will you let me die today?"

"You don't give up, do you?" McCoy retorted angrily. "Drink your water. We have to get moving."



The Canes river was fast and narrow, and teeming with fish and armour-claws. At least they would not starve, for sextantfish and armour-claws were good to eat, and easily caught.

McCoy sat down in the damp sand of the bank, selecting a smooth flat rock. Insects buzzed lazily around his head in the warm sunlight as he examined the stone closely. Finding it satisfactory, he removed his knife and began honing the edge gently against its surface.

"What are you doing?" Jaha'an queried from behind.

"Don't get your hopes up," McCoy replied acidly, then instantly regretted his callousness. "I need a sharp blade to cut those harp-trees over there."

"What for?"

McCoy got up, brushing himself off and approached the stand of slender arbors. "I'm going to make a raft. We can get upstream faster that way."

Jaha'an watched with interest as McCoy deftly cut the soft cork-like stalks and laid them side by side on the ground. Then he bound them together with strips of Lessa bark that had been braided together into strong, taut cords. Over the finished frame he laid layers of soft grasses, then criss-crossed more bark atop that.

By now it was mid-afternoon and he had not yet found food for them. He plodded tiredly over to where Jaha'an lay, dutifully taking life readings in the primitive fashion. He then examined the stump, frowning slightly.

"That's going to need soaking, and I'm running out of salt. You'll have to drink clear water only from now on."

"How that pains me so." Jaha'an said sarcastically.

"I'm going to go and find us a few armour-claws, then scrounge around for some berries or something." McCoy rose, flexing his sore muscles.

"No need, my friend," said Jaha'an cheerfully. "While you worked on your contraption, I had the good fortune to find sustenance for us, and nearby." he gestured to the bundled cloak.

McCoy lifted a corner, peering inside. His face fell. "Tree worms." he said weakly.



He knew when he woke suddenly in the middle of the night that Jaha'an was in pain again. Just when he thought the Capellan was improving, a new turn of events caused him to feel helpless as a physician.

Jaha'an thrashed about, sending the cloak that covered him in a tangled heap. McCoy picked it up and replaced it, for the nights had turned uncharacteristically cooler these days. He felt the heat that radiated from Jaha'an's skin -- the fever had returned. Rising, he went to the river's edge to dip the cloth.

The warrior stirred woozily at the touch of the cool cloth. "Le'nard?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes."

Jaha'an coughed thickly. "Will you now let me die?"

"No."

Jaha'an turned his face away and closed his eyes in sleep.

The next day Jaha'an embarked on his maiden voyage, and McCoy waded chest-high through the river, pulling him upstream by means of a knotted rope of lessa bark looped securely through his arms and across his shoulders. At first he found it far superior to dragging the weight across rough land, but then the viscosity of the water, patches of unseen river grasses and beds of rocks and holes on the bottom quickly exhausted him. Occasionally Jaha'an would slip down the back of the float, or one of the harp tree sections would work loose, threatening to sabotage the whole structure, and McCoy would have to stop and initiate repairs.

He found that the cool water was conducive in checking Jaha'an's overheated body. In fact, circulation around the wound seemed somewhat better, despite the backward conditions.

It was now the fifth day on the river. McCoy could feel nothing but total fatigue during the waking hours, and at night he sank into a dreamless state that offered little rest. His skin began to dry out from constant exposure to the water, leaving a miserable sensation of constant itching. His feet were bruised and raw inside his boots. Red oozing wheals formed on his arms and shoulders where the bark straps rubbed against tender flesh.

Jaha'an made another turn for the worse this morning, unable to keep his breakfast down, and was markedly paler than usual. Still, McCoy was not alarmed yet, for these ups and downs had to be expected.

It was time to turn shoreward now, and McCoy spied a satisfactory clearing on the far bank. Since the river was narrower at this point, he would be able to reach the other side without too much difficulty, the water being only chin-high at its deepest. He started across.

The current of center-stream was mildly stronger. He pulled the raft with more effort, plodding along the bottom at a faster pace. Then, unexpectedly, his right foot slipped into a deep sinkhole, and he lost his balance, dropping under the surface, gulping in a mouthful of murky water. He treaded to the top, coughing and sputtering.

"Are you all right?" Jaha'an urged, alerted by the sudden tug on the ropes.

"Just decided to take a little swim..." McCoy quipped lightly, feeling for the edge of the hole and regaining his foot hold. Suddenly, there was a sharp stab just below his calf, and then another. A violent stinging began to spread from the area, causing him to yelp.

"What is wrong!?" Jaha'an cried.

A horrified look spread across McCoy's face with the final realization. "Numbfish... ! It has to be. I must have disturbed its lair when I fell..." he let go another painful wail, twisting in the water helplessly. "Jaha'an," he gasped. "I'm going to cut myself loose. You paddle to the shore..."

"No! Take my hand; we can both make it!"

The paralyzing effect of the sting was spreading alarmingly fast. Both legs were now useless, and his left arm was starting to stiffen. McCoy pulled up his knife shakily. "Do as I say, Jaha'an! I'm not going to make it to shore in time."

"Hold onto me, I can float us both to safety."

"I'm too heavy! I'll get us both drowned. Go!"

He struggled against the growing loss of sensation, trying to free the raft from himself. A huge hand gripped his wrist, sending the knife under the depths. He looked up. The determined image of Jaha'an holding onto his forearms was the last thing he remembered before the blackness came.



He woke, unable to move or even to open his eyes. He could not feel anything above or below him, and for all he knew he could be floating free in space, with one important difference -- he was alive. Or so he thought. It must be true. It took an eternity to force his eyes to open, and then it was difficult to focus them onto anything in the grey light. He tried harder.

Jaha'an was there -- yes, he was sure of it. His brother of the blood leaned with his back against a tree, looking depleted and washed out. Nearby was the less than perfect raft. He made an effort to speak. "Ja..." was all he could manage.

"What a pair we make," he heard Jaha'an laugh. "Bait for the Cats, yes?"

McCoy managed a weak smile.

"It is nearly morning. The poison will take time to be gone from your body. You are lucky to be alive, Le'nard. Many times, the Numbfish kills."

"You... save... me... " attempted McCoy.

"Yes." Jaha'an looked away, seemingly in deep thought. "You were right, Le'nard. Life is important to me. I did not realize it until I saw you drowning. Any other man... I did not wish to let you die. Perhaps I felt what you must have felt for me." His hands picked up the last dagger, fondling it gingerly.

"Perhaps our paths are not so different after all." He plunged the knife into the soft earth, and McCoy could see that a change had come over him, for there was now a look of determination on his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words issued forth.



The days passed slowly, the nights far too quickly. Jaha'an made a few attempts at balancing himself against a walking stick but invariably became faint after a few steps, and the experiment was soon abandoned.

Jaha'an's health alternated between stability and infirmity. His pallor grew more pronounced, and he tended to sleep to an increasing extent. But today, Jaha'an's spirits seem lifted. While McCoy trudged against the flowing current, his companion sang a lilting ballad that glorified the great conquests of Parnek and told of the honor he had bestowed upon his people.

"Look" Jaha'an exuberated. "There, above that crest. A winged lion-serpent!"

McCoy paused, squinting out the sun. "No, it's not. It's just a graffa-dove."

"You are mistaken, it's a serpent. I can see its long tail wrapped about its legs."

"Uh-uh. Graffa-dove."

"Serpent!"

"Bet?"

"Bet!"

McCoy nodded. Taking a deep breath, he let out a warbled shriek loud enough to wake the dead. They stilled, listening.

From the distance, the shrill bleating of the lion-serpent answered. McCoy scowled.

"You lose." Jaha'an taunted.

"There's just one problem." McCoy answered gravely.

"What is that?"

"We forgot to set the stakes."

The raft that supported Jaha'an began to quake steadily to the big Capellan's racking laughter. McCoy joined in with his own chuckling, until the two men were engaged in a full, uproarious guffaw. The raft toppled, spilling Jaha'an over the side. McCoy scooped him up, giggling foolishly. "That's what you get for being so damned smart."

McCoy carried Jaha'an to dry ground, dragging the float behind. He dropped them both to the sand, not failing to notice the tired look on his friend's face. "We'll rest, then continue," he said solicitously.

"There is no need. I am fit." Jaha'an protested.

"Well, I'm not!" McCoy grumbled. "Unless, of course, you'd like to change places!"

He proceeded with his routine of checking Jaha'an's wound.

"Must you fuss with that, my friend?"

"I'm a doctor. It's my job." He examined it scrutinizingly. "Hmmm -- not so good. Are you sure there's no pain?"

"Perhaps a slight twinge, no more. You must stop this overprotectiveness, Le'nard."

McCoy grunted offhandedly, recovering the stump. He sighed, then pulled his tunic over his head, wringing it out.

"I swear, for the first ten days of this trip I would have given anything for a cool bath. Now, I don't think I'll ever be able to face anything short of one of those new fangled sonic things!"

"Oh? My nose tells me otherwise." Jaha'an remarked slyly.

"Hmmp. You don't exactly reek of meadow flowers yourself, you know!"

Jaha'an nodded agreement then let his head rest against the ground limply. "I feel tired," he rasped.

"Sleep all you want. We..." McCoy cut himself short, head jerking upright suddenly.

"What..." Jaha'an began.

"Shh! I heard something." He rose in one swift motion, cautiously approaching the direction of the sound. He heard it again; it was a definite rustling. Something or someone was moving in the woods.

Unconsciously, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his blade. In the distance he could make out a patch of gold, a smear of blue; his eyes widened in joyful recognition. "Hey! Over here! Halloo!" he yelled wildly, waving his arms above his head. The figures in the forest stopped and turned toward the sound of his voice. They broke into a run toward him.

"Doctor McCoy!" a young security man called, gesturing madly. "We'd almost given up on you -- the medical team was due back on the Crockett yesterday!"

Briggs lumbered up beside them. "Len, you alright? Where's Jaha'an?"

"I'm fine, Hank. But Jaha'an's been injured -- I had to amputate a leg. Is our equipment still on the surface? I'm going to need it."

McCoy led the three officers to the river bank where they hefted Jaha'an onto the raft. "Easy -- that's it." McCoy said, trying to make the Capellan more comfortable with a pillow formed from his damp shirt.

Dr. Briggs had taken out his communicator, and was speaking with the Captain.

"Yes, they're alive Sir. We're bringing them in now."

"Good work." came Bassetti's reply. "Looks like your hunch paid off, Briggs. We'll be standing by."

McCoy took the communicator from Briggs. "This is McCoy, Captain. Request an emergency surgery set up."

"We'll be ready, Doctor."

"Thank you, sir. McCoy out." he flipped the grid down.

"Jaha'an," he said quietly. "Everything's going to work out. You just relax and enjoy the ride."

Jaha'an appeared infinitely tired, but managed a small smile. "Le'nard," he said with almost no voice at all, "You are truly my brother." his eyes indicated a sincerity that touched McCoy deeply.

"We'd better get going, Doctor," the security man pressed.

"Of course," McCoy assented, picking up the corner of the frame.



The walk back to the encampment took only a few hours, but it seemed to McCoy that it far surpassed the entire journey they had undertaken three weeks before. From time to time he would glance back to Jaha'an, reassured by the peaceful expression of the sleeping Capellan. It gratified him that Jaha'an had accepted his help, and perhaps a tribal sanction would now be within reach.



At last the smoke from cooking fires could be seen and the camp was but a few hundred meters away. McCoy could feel his heart pounding.

They set the Capellan down gently at the edge of the clearing, and Briggs barked an order to one of the men to fetch his tricorder and sensor. McCoy knelt beside Jaha'an. "Wake up, Jaha'an. We're home."

The warrior did not stir.

McCoy carefully touched his fingers to Jaha'an's neck, looking down in concentration.

Jaha'an was dead.

The physician's head snapped back in stunned disbelief. "No!" his voice laced with denial. "He can't be -- his condition wasn't that bad -- not severe enough to cause... this!" He whirled around. "Anderson! Get me a resuscitator!"

Nearby, Briggs waved a sensor over Jaha'an. "Belay that, Lieutenant." he said. "Len -- it's too late."

McCoy turned on him angrily, tears beginning to form in his smouldering blue eyes. He opened his mouth for a retort, but Briggs shook his head ominously.

McCoy looked back to Jaha'an, his pale, darkened face serene somehow. "No," he mumbled unconvincingly. "It's just not..." he seemed to choke back the words.

"He simply died." Briggs was saying. "He just closed his eyes and stopped living."

But McCoy wasn't listening. He pulled himself to his feet savagely and stormed off, shaking profusely.

The Capellan elders, along with the Chief, stood framed in the opening of his tent. He felt rage, even hate for them right now. They were the last ones he wanted to confront in the mood he was in.

Thaarn did not wait for an invitation to speak. "We must know if Jaha'an hel Parnek succeeded in his Daranhal. What is your word as witness?"

"What's the difference?" McCoy spat bitterly. "He's dead now -- not that it should concern you."

An elder stiffened, but Thaarn put out a restraining hand. "I forgive this transgression, McCoy," he said in a flat steely tone. "for your ways are not ours. I ask you again -- was Daranhal completed?"

"Yes." McCoy stated simply after a long pause. Cold-blooded bastards.

The Chief nodded somberly. "The son of Parnek honors us twofold," he said to the others, his tone milder now. "Go, prepare the fires. Have the garment-maker prepare the warrior's cowl, the finest his skills will produce." The group turned and left, but Thaarn lingered momentarily.

"Jaha'an made you his brother of the blood," he said to McCoy. "I do not understand his reasoning, but as his brother you are a man among us."

McCoy regarded him wordlessly, eyes expressionless and cold. Thaarn bowed, and exited the tent, leaving McCoy in the stifling dimness. There was no comfort in the Chief's words for him; only emptiness.

Captain Bassetti found him in the command tent gathering a few overlooked items and stuffing them carelessly into the carry-all over his shoulder. Either the doctor had not heard his entry, or he simply refused to acknowledge it.

"I've contacted the ship," the Captain said at last. "They're ready for you. You can beam up at your convenience."

McCoy turned slowly, refraining from direct eye contact. "Thank you Captain."

Bassetti cleared his throat awkwardly. "McCoy -- I won't see you again. Crockett will take you to Starbase 8 for reassignment. I just wanted to say goodbye, and wish you the best."

"Thank you, Sir. It's been an honor serving under you."

"Right then." Bassetti fumbled. "Another thing," he spoke again. "I wasn't supposed to tell you this, but you've been recommended for a promotion. If all goes well, you'll go from Junior to Chief. Possibly Starship assignment."

McCoy nodded blandly, and Bassetti took the cue, leaving the tent in silence.

The impact of this news failed to affect McCoy. His mind was elsewhere -- his soul atop a barren snow-encrusted mountain, wailing in the icy cold.



Numbly, he stepped outside, seeing for the first time the funeral ceremony for Jaha'an. Trancelike, he walked toward the center pyre where the body had lain all day and would remain until the three moons were together in the sky tonight. Then the actual cremation would begin, and Jaha'an's ashes would rise above the trees where the winds would carry them to Aha-Karon to await eternity.

For now, the women sang, the men drank, and the children looked on with curiosity. Around Jaha'an was a bright ring of torches burning vigil to the fallen. Many fires will burn in my honor, so the witches tears had said.



Suddenly, he was overcome with bitterness, and he strode angrily to the edge of the camp where he leaned heavily against a lessa tree. He felt the anger seething, the rage, the helpless feeling of betrayal. Why? He repeated over and over. Why?

A gentle hand touched his arm. He spun around to find Lysithia. Her stoically engraved features regarded him auspiciously.

"Why did you not bring a torch to the circle, McCoy?" she asked, beratement in her manner. "Thaarn says you are a man. Do you not do as other men?"

"I'll never be a man by your standards. Not if it means giving up on life for the sake of pride." his tone was hard.

"My son accepted death, yes. But that does not mean he rejected life. You should be aware of that above all men, for it was for you he made the sacrifice."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were his greatest friend -- but that could make him no less a Capellan any more than you could forsake your own ways. Yes, we die honorably -- there is no other way. He would have been killed -- either by his own knife, or by another's -- it made no difference. Were you a Capellan, you would have done it."

"But you are not, and that would have pained you, to see him die. He could not bear to hurt you -- you Earthmen are so delicate in such matters. In this manner, you were spared, and he remained with honor."

"To die in such a way as he did is considered among us the highest of spirituality. Not everyone is capable of such an act, and it is revered among Capellans as the final achievement. Consider it as a gift, McCoy -- the finest gift any man can give."

"Blast your philosophies!" McCoy spat. "It was meaningless. Utterly and unaccountably senseless!"

"What is senseless to one is of the utmost importance to another."

"What in blazes makes death so attractive to you people!" His voice became angrier. "Why are you so preoccupied with killing each other off, or letting the sick suffer needlessly, or committing willful suicide, when you could be raising the standard of living?"

"I could pose the same question to you, McCoy. Why do you Earthmen spend so much energy prolonging life when there is no room for those yet to be born?"

They had reached a stalemate. McCoy knew the discussion could go no further, and gracefully capitulated. He sighed wearily. "I'm sorry, Lysithia. My grief for your son unsettled me. Though I can neither understand nor condone it, I accept your words."

The old woman smiled faintly. "Jaha'an would be pleased. Come."

She led him to the pyre. Jaha'an's face seemed radiant amid the finery he was dressed in.

The three moons had risen. Each man of the tribe took his torch from the ring, holding it solemnly aloft at the ancient chant came from their lips: "Kira tallen sava tiaglam, Jaha'an hel Parnek, Darn Akam -- You above all. Jaha'an hel Parnek, we honor."

High Chief Thaarn stepped forward to ignite the flame. Without warning, he turned to McCoy and offered the burning rod.

Gingerly, McCoy accepted it, and approached the pyre. For you, Jaha'an, my friend, he thought, I too, honor you.

He touched the flame to a waiting tinder, watching the consuming blaze engulf Jaha'an's body. Other torches were cast into the inferno, making a roaring fire that was so intense McCoy had to step back several feet.

He watched for only a few minutes, the heat offering solace to his chilled soul, then took out his communicator to signal the order to energize.

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#### COMMUNICATIONS

ADMIRAL J. FITZPATRICK, STARFLEET  
OPERATIONS

STARDATE 1409.03

SIR

IT IS WITH REGRET THAT I INFORM YOU  
THAT THE ENTIRE EXPLORATION TEAM SENT  
TO CAPELLA IV, NINE MEMBERS OF THE USS  
CROCKETT INCLUDING THE CAPTAIN,  
PERISHED IN A RAID MADE ON THE TRIBE OF  
PARNEK BY A RIVAL BAND. THE MASSACRE  
LEFT NO SURVIVORS. THE PARNEK PEOPLE  
WERE ONE OF THE LAST OF THE SMALLER  
GROUPS UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF THE  
CAPELLAN TEER. AN ATTACHED  
SUPPLEMENT LISTS THE CASUALTIES OF THE  
LANDING PARTY.

# INTENTIONS

By: Susan Meinecke

Art: Gennie Summers

It has been a long time  
since we sat and talked like this.  
Do you remember when?  
I do.

You were different then.  
Younger surely,  
but more than just that --  
you were more impassioned,  
hungrier, so determined.  
Older, less brash  
and much more vulnerable,  
now you can afford to let me see  
some of your pain and it hurts me  
more than you will ever know.  
It was never my intention  
to hurt you.

I am sorry that I didn't tell him  
but in all truth,  
I only did what I thought best,  
for David, for me  
and you.

He really is a fine boy, Jim.  
A lot like you were.

I know he will get over this with time  
and be able to look at you  
without such anger  
and see the man I always saw.  
I know he will...





# Salt in the Wound

By: Debbie Gilbert

With full consent, I opened my mind to yours.  
Given the stakes, could I have done otherwise?

In a too -- familiar ritual,  
Your touch flamed inside my brain,  
Our pulsebeats fell into synchrony,  
And I began to see...

Images, barely faded,  
Which I had hoped to bury,  
Now refocused, sharper than ever:  
A friend cruelly isolated in death;  
The blood, the burns, the pain;  
A voice rasping out the words,  
Don't grieve... logical... needs of the many...

Reliving the nightmare, again feeling  
Powerless to prevent the inevitable,  
Emotions surge back, doubled in force,  
Strengthened by the meld between us.  
My God, I could barely stand it the first time...

The pain is too great  
Even to struggle against.  
I can only whisper  
A soft half-plea:  
"No!"


At last the link is broken;  
My thoughts are again mine alone.  
You've pushed, probed, gouged,  
Left me raw inside, all for nothing.  
What you seek is not here.  
We've cut each other deeply,  
Yet are none the wiser for it.

Your intentions were good,  
Your need for answers urgent.

Why, then, do I feel  
As if my soul has been raped?

# EMPTY

 Art: Suzan Lovett

By: Shirley D. Sipe 

# SPACES

Kirk rubbed his eyes wearily. Though not much time had passed, Kirk and his friends' lives had changed -- maybe forever. Everyone was quiet, perhaps thinking of lost careers or opportunities or maybe, like him, simply too tired to think about anything.

There had been very little to say after McCoy had startled them all by speaking in Spock's voice. The fact that the doctor was carrying Spock's Katra had been brought home to them with an eerie and unpleasant jolt when it seemed McCoy had momentarily become Spock.

Kirk heard a sound behind him like something heavy hitting the floor. Everyone on the bridge turned to see McCoy lying in a heap next to the science station. After a moment's hesitation, everyone jumped up at once.

Kirk's heart was pounding in his chest as he gently turned McCoy over. He exhaled in relief as he realized the doctor was breathing, shallow but steady.

McCoy stirred and opened his eyes when Kirk laid a hand on his forehead. "Jim?"

"Easy, Bones. How do you feel?"

"A little -- " McCoy's voice went hoarse and he had to cough " -- lightheaded. What happened?"

Kirk found the strength to smile. "You're asking me? One minute you were sitting in your chair and the next you were flat on your back. Did you feel anything?"

"No. I don't remember anything. It was like I was there -- then I wasn't." McCoy seemed to feel better so Kirk helped him sit up.

Scotty looked thoughtful. "How long has it been since you've eaten, Leonard?"

McCoy frowned. "I... I'm not sure. I haven't had much of an appetite and there's been so much to do." He was staring into space, speaking softly, almost as if he were explaining to someone else. Kirk felt a chill run



down his spine, and with it a stab of anger -- at himself principally. He should have noticed McCoy wasn't taking care of himself. He had known even before the Enterprise docked, that McCoy had been distracted, losing sleep. McCoy was slowly being driven past his limit and Kirk had done nothing to slow it down. It had taken Scotty to notice the obvious.

Kirk kept his voice steady. "Well, enough's enough." He helped McCoy to his feet and walked him to the turbolift. He turned and faced the others. "Gentlemen, we'll be in the rec room. Call me the minute anything happens."

"Aye, Sir." said Scotty.



McCoy was standing on his own by the time the turbolift doors had closed. "Draggin' me down here like some damn kid -- I don't have to be spoon-fed."

"I didn't say I was going to feed you. I just want you to eat something and you're going to even if I have to stand over you the whole time."

"I don't know why you make such a big deal out of everything. I'm OK." McCoy was still angry even though he knew Kirk was right. It was probably a waste of energy to argue.

"Sure. That's what you've been telling everybody ever since Spock died."

"Well I ought to know. I'm a doctor and besides I... "

The turbolift doors opened and they were shocked into silence. Though Scotty had turned on the life support and lights, it was so empty -- and so huge and quiet.

"Come on." Kirk whispered. Their steps echoed as they walked down the corridor. Kirk felt like a child walking down the middle aisle of a church.

"I never noticed it was so big," McCoy said.

Kirk looked at McCoy and said, "Bones, we've got to stop whispering, nobody's listening to us."

He was gratified to see McCoy grin with real humor -- the first time since Spock's death. "Let's eat."

Kirk paused in the doorway to the rec and looked at the room thoughtfully. "You know, I don't think I've seen this room empty before. It seems like there was always someone in the corner having a cup of coffee -- or something."

McCoy sighed, looking desolate, and Kirk decided to get on with the matter at hand. "I guess we've got our choice." He walked over to one of the food processors. "What'll it be... steak?"

The doctor shook his head slowly. "No. Just... some salad or something."

"Hot vegetables and salad," Kirk amended. He punched up McCoy's meal and ordered a plate of meat and vegetables for himself. He tried not to dwell on the meaning of McCoy's new eating habits.

Kirk had been afraid he might have to fight to get his friend to eat. However, after a slow start, McCoy seemed to get his appetite back. He probably had not realized he was hungry. As they were having their coffee, Kirk said thoughtfully, "You know, Bones, this is the first time the Enterprise has seemed like a machine to me. She doesn't care if there's a hundred people on this deck or two. If we left her, she'd keep pumping in life support, until she used all her energy, then the auxiliary would go on to protect people who weren't even here."

McCoy was staring at him. Finally he said gently, "Hell, Jim, I knew that and I'm not even a scientist."

Kirk grinned self-consciously. "I knew it too. I guess I have always felt she was doing it to take care of us."

"It was what she was made to do, Jim. You're not the first person, or the last, to romanticize a ship. Places or things sometimes become mixed with the memories we have of people we were with, or things that happened. I feel that way about my granddaddy's house. It's someplace peaceful I can go to, even though I know it's mostly my childhood memories that make me feel that way. The house is just a house, but the feeling is real -- even if it is illogical."

McCoy had a faraway look in his eyes, but after a second he focused on Kirk again. "If the Enterprise is a brave, beautiful, honorably lady, it's because the people on board her make her that way. They've given her a heart and soul. You're only seeing her shell now, not the spark that drives her." McCoy shrugged. "Sorry, didn't mean to preach."

"I needed to hear it. We could all use a little preaching from time to time." Kirk was going to remind McCoy to never stop doing it, but he could not even say it as a joke. His throat felt tight. He had lost so much already -- to lose anything more was unbearable to think about.

"Sorry, not used to all this heavy thinking."

"Me either. Let's go."

At the door, Kirk turned and looked back. The room looked forlorn and lonely. With the shining tables and neatly arranged chairs, the Enterprise seemed to be waiting for her children to come home.





Dear Jim and Spock,

It was another one of those days, days in which we all earned our "combat pay" in a blood-soaked reality -- us against the Klingons, will it ever end? -- communications out, the bridge silent as shock after shock rocked the ship. Something in me died a little, waiting for word whether or not the bridge was still up there, much less whether the two of you had survived. That, combined with the litter of bodies from a situation I thought could have been avoided, made me furious with you both. In the privacy of my office, thank God, I called you, Jim, an incompetent ass, and you, Spock, a total idiot. I hereby tender for the record my deepest apologies, stating that I was wrong -- you've never been incompetent in your life, Jim, and Spock's idiocy has never been total.

But mine has. Today frightened me beyond words -- what if I had died today, angry and hurting, my last words to you caustic and bitter?

I've been wondering all night, as we put this ship back together again, what to say to you and how to say it. Part of me wanted to put the idea aside as maudlin and silly, but everytime I realize it could have been me lying in that morgue... I thought of using the proverbial "last orders" tape, but as we all know, strange things happen to personal tapes in extreme emergencies, and I've never trusted the damn things much anyhow.

So I decided that a personal hand-written letter would be best. The written words has survived for countless centuries, surely this one letter would survive until you both could read it. Besides, it gives me a sense of... continuance... knowing you'll be holding in your hands words written with mine. A continuance of touch, down through eternity.

Now that I'm at that point in the letter... the words won't come. Not that there aren't any words, just that there are too many words to be said...

I love you both, deeply. Sharing in your friendship has given my life a depth and meaning I thought lost long ago, a richness that makes every passing day something to be savored, and every new tomorrow something to be looked forward to with a child's delight at Christmas. Life with the two of you has been anything but dull, a fair mixture of good and bad, all wrapped in the warmth of your companionship and caring. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

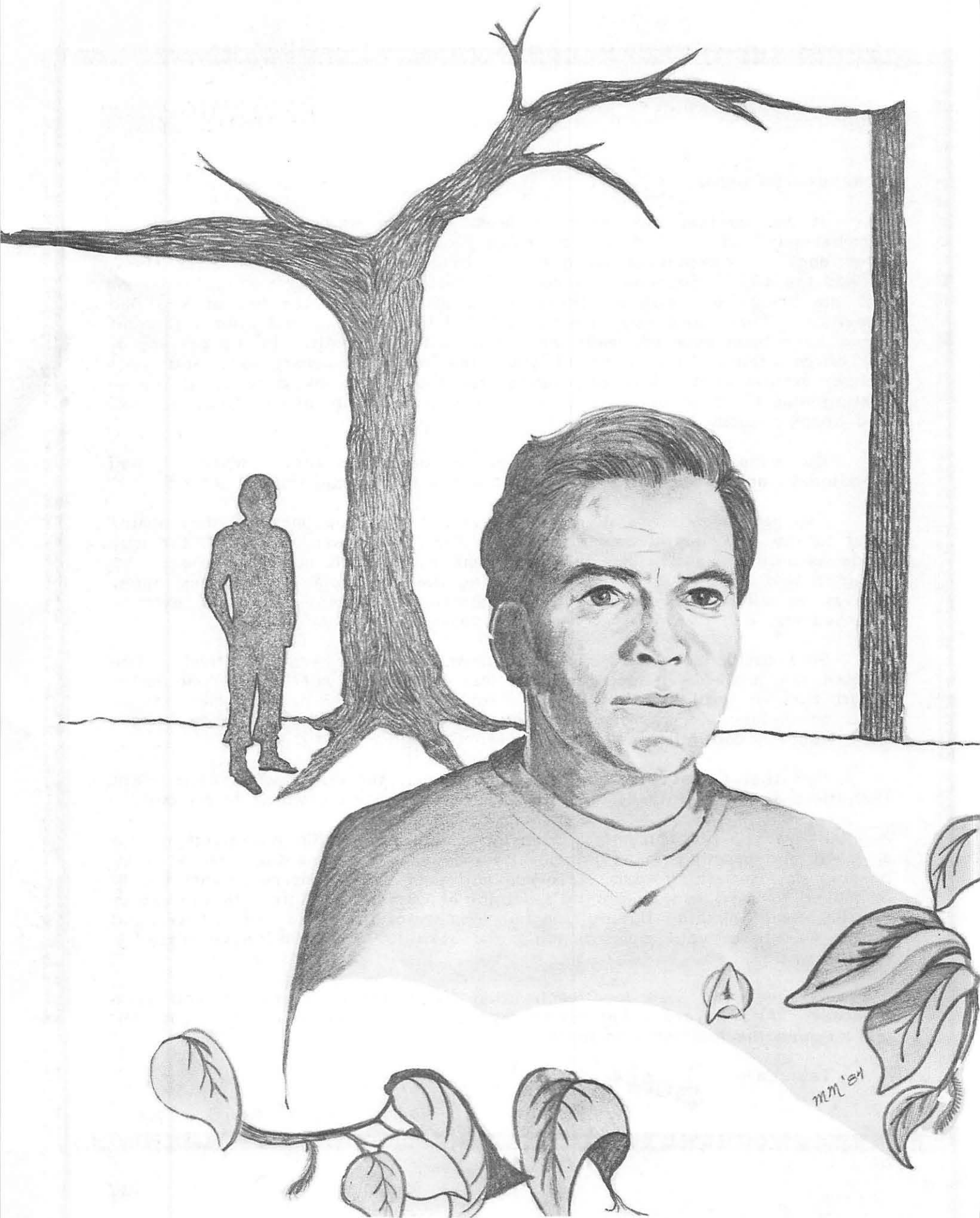
Last orders? To love each other, treasure each moment you have together. And never, never mourn my passing -- I've had it all, and you don't mourn the luckiest man in the universe.

Take care,

*Bones*

By: L. Syck & L. Ridener







# SECOND CHANCE

By: Sandy Zier

Art: Mary Mills

It is not often one has a second chance to  
say things never spoken.  
Especially when they now seem important

It is not often one has a second chance to  
cleanse the stains of guilt  
and to live -- and share their life

-- with someone who truly wants to share

I have been given a second chance to  
do all these things  
-- a second chance to live...  
to love... to be happy

Will I have time, I wonder,  
-- to say the things still unsaid,  
-- wash away my guilt, to live -- to share, and  
-- to tell you how important you are to me

before we lose each other again?

Many would love to be in my position  
For I've been given a reprieve -- and time to  
express feelings I could not express before

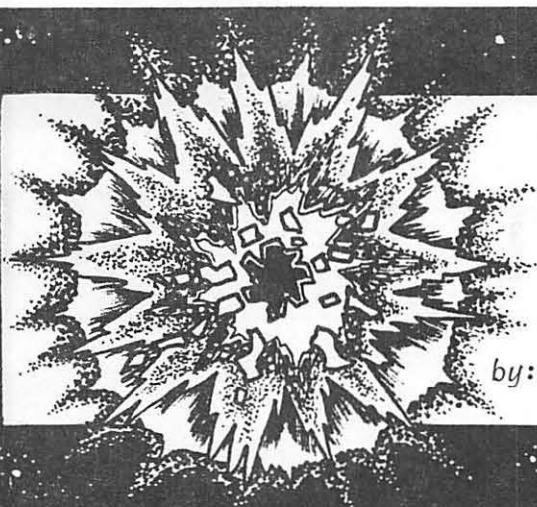
I know our paths will join again -- though  
how long is uncertain  
And I must be prepared - when the time is right  
-- to speak my feelings and my concern  
-- make you understand the way I feel  
-- and ease my mind

You turn and look at me...

And I realize -- all my concern was unfounded,

For you do, indeed, understand.





# No Other Way

by: Ginna LaCroix

You swore we weren't finished yet,  
But I never dreamed you'd do something like this.  
I stood at your side and listened  
As you called up the code  
To end the life of my Enterprise...  
Your Enterprise...  
Ours.  
You ruled her -- I ran her,  
Now, together, to keep her from them,  
We will kill her.  
Your death sentence passed,  
You look to me to proclaim mine.  
Endless objections race through my mind.  
Then I look into your eyes  
And see that you are crying,  
For me -- and for her.  
My objections go unvoiced  
As I add my sentence to yours,  
And hear her accept,  
Trusting,  
Unknowing,  
Blindly obedient to the end...  
Dear God, if only there was another way!

Border: Caro Hedge



# Thy Brother's Keeper

Art: T.J. Burnside

By: Ginger Dawson

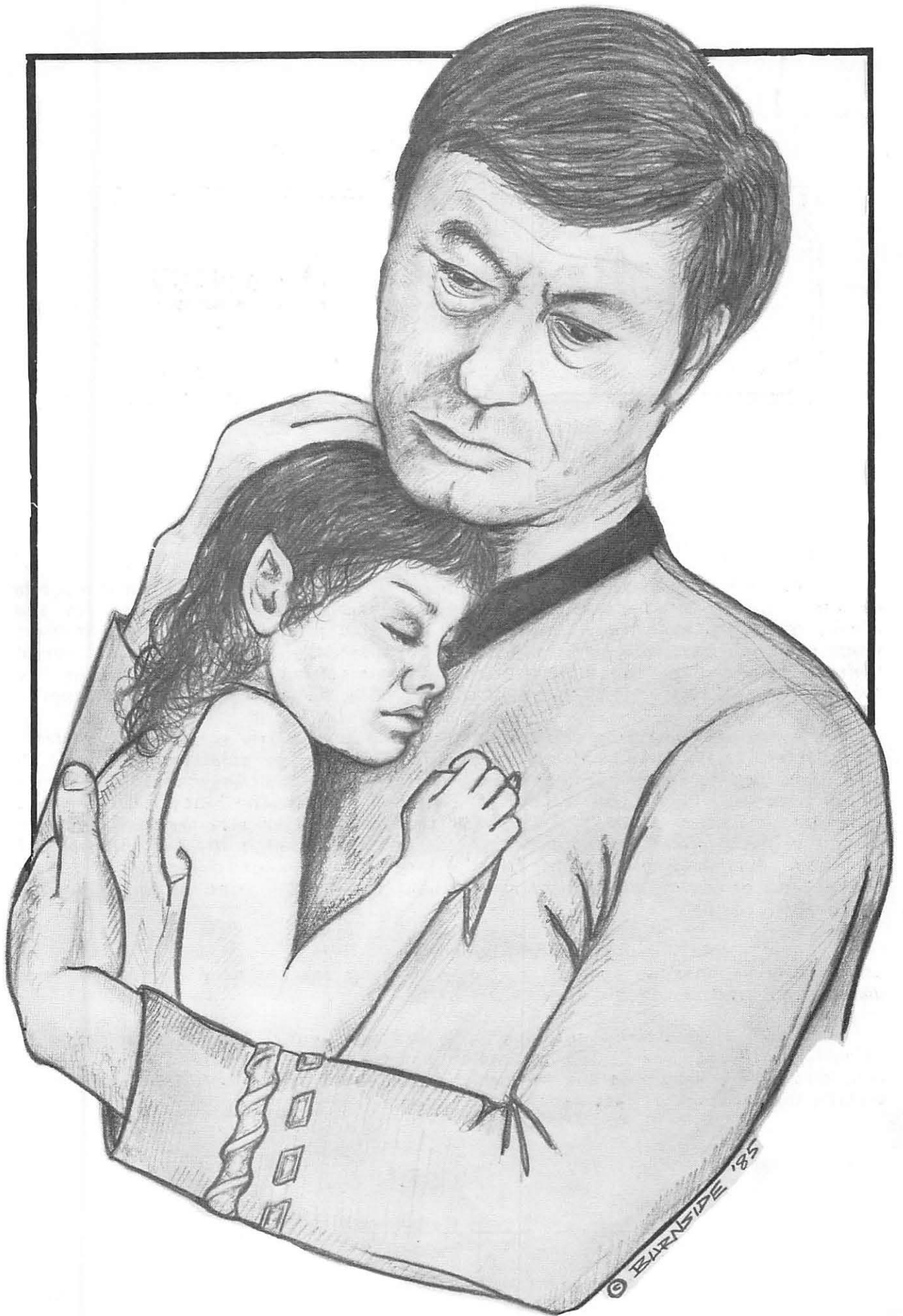
Nearly four weeks had passed since the shuttle crash had marooned him on this small isolated planetoid. His pilot had been killed instantly in the crash, leaving a severely injured McCoy alone to fend for himself. The first week had not been too bad, all things considered. The emergency survival training required by all Starfleet personnel had served him well. However, by the second week when no rescue had come, McCoy began to know true despair.

"Damn malfunctioning shuttlecrafts! Damn things are worse than the damn transporter. Having your atoms scrambled into space, or splatter your body all over some god-forsaken hunk of rock. Some choice!" McCoy cursed the fates, along with the technician who had checked the shuttle out O.K. for the umpteenth time as he made his way back from the meager stream from which he drew life-giving water. His campsite -- if one could call it that -- consisted of a modest overhang protruding from a large mountainous outcropping. The shelter it provided did little more than break the wind which howled constantly.

Tired, cold, hungry and bone-weary from pain, McCoy settled as comfortably as possible against the rocks, taking care to keep his injured arm immobilized, and closed his eyes.

"Jim." He muttered out loud. "Where are you?" He chuckled softly to himself. "Right now I'd even welcome Spock's pointy-eared face." He chuckled again, imagining the strong disapproving glare the Vulcan would have treated him to for that last remark.







McCoy felt something touch his forehead and he started violently, eyes snapping open as he exclaimed, "What the... !" His voice trailed off as he stared wide-eyed into the equally startled face of a small and obviously very frightened child. And not just any child -- a Vulcan.

"What the... " He began again, attempting to get to his feet. At the sound of his voice the child made a frightened whimpering noise and backed away from him.

"Hey," McCoy said gently, realizing his error. "I'm not going to hurt you. Come here." He remained perfectly still and beckoned to her with his good arm. She was Vulcan all right. No mistaking those pointed ears and upswept brows. He estimated her age to be between 3 and 4. But here? How? Taking a closer look, McCoy could see that her tunic was tattered and dirty, and she bore scars and burns not unlike his own. She still held her distance. McCoy found himself drawn to her eyes -- big expressive eyes that clearly showed her obvious turmoil. She was badly frightened, and there was a hunger in those dark eyes -- a desperate plea -- but for what?

Ever so slowly, McCoy knelt and beckoned calmly again. "Please. I won't hurt you. Come." Struck by a sudden idea, McCoy paired his fingers as best he could mimicking the Vulcan salute. The child watched with cat-like eyes and something registered in their dark depths. Assuming a stance of rigid attention, her small hand came up and she returned the salute with practiced grace. McCoy smiled at her -- so young, yet so very Vulcan. The facade lasted briefly though, for as he watched tears sprang to her eyes and she began to cry. Instinct took over as McCoy moved to go to her, but before he could get to his feet he found his arms embracing a tearful Vulcan child. She clung to him with a fierce strength he would not have thought possible for so small a child.

"Come now," He soothed. "It's all right. No one's going to hurt you. Take it easy little one." He crooned to her over and over again until she finally quieted. McCoy held her close, stroking her tangle of jet black hair. It felt good to have something -- someone to hold on to in this hell. When her sniffing subsided McCoy tilted her face towards him and asked, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Her eyes had that trapped, pleading look in them again -- almost a crazed desperation that made McCoy's heart ache. "Damn." He muttered.

"My... my name is.. T... T'Atel." She stammered in broken terran standard. "We... we... crashed. Mother and Father... " She broke off, unable to continue. McCoy could surmise the rest. Damn. Marooned alone. Just like himself.

"How long have you been here?" He asked quietly.



Her eyes brimmed with tears as she replied. "Sev... seven months."

"Oh my God." McCoy whispered as he pulled her into a tight embrace, ignoring the pain in his injured arm. Seven months?! A child. Alone. "You poor thing."

"Please," she cried, "please..." Grasping his larger hands clumsily in her smaller ones, she set them to her temples. "Please." She entreated, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Aw hell." McCoy said, realizing what she wanted. "Baby I'm no telepath. I can't help you that way. I'm sorry."

Something snapped then, and McCoy watched in horror as her eyes went blank and she savagely broke away from him, screaming hysterically. McCoy followed, catching her easily. Subduing her, however, was another story. As small as she was, she was Vulcan, and in the grip of some strange trauma that increased her already amazing strength immensely. Finally McCoy did the only thing left. He slapped her across the face. She blinked once, twice, then looked into his concerned face and melted into quiet tears.

"Oh, Baby, I'm sorry I had to do that. Honest I am. Please stop crying." McCoy gathered her to him, and she clung as if her life depended on it.

"I... I beg... for... forgiveness." She stammered. "You are not Vulcan. I should not... have asked."

Such a brave little thing. McCoy frantically searched his memory for all he knew of Vulcan society, which he now found to be pitifully little. How could he have known Spock for so many years and yet know so little about him and his people. McCoy cursed his own bigoted indifference for that.

Vulcans were telepaths. He knew that much. Strong telepathic bonds existed between mates. That much had come to light after many years of knowing Spock and his parents. Telepathic bonds between parents and children? Made sense. And it would explain T'Atel's actions. How important was the bond? Among humans, who were not telepathic, he knew the importance of the bond that existed between mother and child during those first early stages of development. Among telepaths the bond must be a critical, physical thing.

"Damn." McCoy swore again. Seven months lacking something he did not understand, but which she obviously needed. He held her tighter and could feel her responding by snuggling even closer to him. They remained in this position for a long time. Without even being aware of it, McCoy had begun a soothing rocking motion as he hummed a tune from an old earth lullaby.

"What are you called?" T'Atel interrupted after awhile. McCoy smiled.

"I've been called a great many things little lady. But you may call me McCoy." T'Atel repeated the name, getting the feel of its alien sound, then:

"We're going to die here, aren't we McCoy?"

McCoy felt his heart sink. Much as he wanted to, he sensed that lying to this sensitive, intuitive child would do more harm than good. "I honestly don't know T'Atel. We're certainly going to do everything in our power not to, aren't we?" T'Atel did not look convinced, but smiled weakly and nodded her assent.

"You are Terran aren't you?" she asked after an awkward silence.

"Yes I am." McCoy replied.

"Tell me about your world, your people, everything." McCoy felt simultaneous, conflicting feelings of awed admiration and shame. Admiration that so young a child could bravely face her probable death, and still be curious about life around her. And shame. Shame for not having taken an honest interest in her people before now.

The days passed with the two exchanging stories of their respective cultures and personal lives. McCoy was amazed to discover that Vulcan children were not, after all, so different from their human counterparts. T'Atel, though more restrained and mature than a human child her age, had a loving nature McCoy found impossible not to respond to. They became inseparable. McCoy noted that T'Atel touched him often -- whether to hold his hand, cuddle in his embrace, or just sit close -- she maintained a physical link with him constantly. It dawned on him that some kind of empathic bond had formed between them, for she seemed able to sense his shifts of moods and responded accordingly. Likewise, McCoy found that he was able to anticipate the strange seizures which gripped T'Atel with increasing frequency.

Tragedy struck not soon after this startling revelation. While on one of their daily food foraging expeditions, a section of rock gave way under their combined weight. Instinctively each grasped for the remaining cliff edge but McCoy's already injured arm could not support the strain and he tumbled down the nearly straight vertical mountain side. When the dust had settled T'Atel turned her frantic gaze in search of her adopted mentor. He laid some 20 meters down among broken rocks and rubble.

"No!" She screamed in denial. "No! No! No!" Releasing her own grip, T'Atel let herself tumble down to where McCoy laid. She was dazed and battered by the time she reached bottom, but that did not matter. Scrambling to McCoy she reached out with a trembling hand to touch his face, but did not complete the gesture.

"Fa... Father..." she whimpered brokenly, and then her mind snapped. The combined shock and trauma of losing both parents, being severed from their nurturing bond, and now this new loss was simply too much for her young mind to cope with. Mindlessly she screamed and raged until oblivion mercifully rose up to claim her.

McCoy was not dead, though her confused, young mind could not know that. Hours later when McCoy finally awoke, his heart nearly broke at what he found. Gathering the still form to him, he rocked back and forth, calling her name over and over as hot tears coursed down his face. So young, so small, so brave. Time ceased for McCoy. All he knew was grief. He did not even hear the whining hum of the transporter effect -- nor did he hear his name being called.

"Enterprise, we've found him! Standby transporter with emergency medical transport."

When awareness filtered into McCoy's sluggish, grief-filled haze, he looked up into the concerned faces of two young security guards.

"Take it easy Doc. "We'll have you out of here in a minute."

"Spock!" McCoy blurted. "Get Spock down here right away!"

The two guards exchanged puzzled glances.

"Dammit move!" McCoy shouted, and the guards moved to comply.

Spock materialized almost immediately. He took in the situation at once and was instantly kneeling at McCoy and the child's side. McCoy looked pleadingly at Spock, his eyes brimming with unshed tears as he croaked,

"Help her Spock. Please... help her."

The Vulcan's eyes softened as he took in first the human's haggard face and then the small, quivering bundle that was a Vulcan child in his arms. Silently, almost reverently, he reached out with long, graceful fingers to gently stroke her ebony hair. A small, muffled whimper was the only sound to pierce the silent tableau. More deliberately, Spock's hand brushed T'Atel's temple. The whimpering trailed off and then finally ceased. McCoy looked hopefully, expectantly at Spock, willing him to continue -- to ease the child's suffering. He wanted more than anything to be able to help this brave little creature, but knew what she needed most right now, he was not equipped to give. Spock's fingers were now reaching for the contact points to establish the meld T'Atel so desperately needed.

McCoy watched anxiously, not even daring to breathe. T'Atel still clung to him fiercely -- mindlessly -- her face burrowed into his chest, eyes squinted tightly shut. Suddenly she stiffened, her eyes snapping open as her gaze frantically sought the source of the soothing presence filling her mind. She looked quizzically up at McCoy who smiled warmly down at her, but no... he was not the presence in her mind. She turned her head and her eyes fastened on Spock. She blinked twice, as if not comprehending what she saw. A Vulcan! Spock removed the hand touching her temple and extended it palm up towards her. T'Atel looked at the proffered hand and then returned her gaze to Spock's face. A gentle wisp of a smile touched his tranquil features and he

nodded once. T'Atel gave a small cry of joy and flew into his waiting arms. With a rare gentleness McCoy did not think him capable of, Spock scooped her up and cradled her to him, re-establishing the full meld with his free hand. Fascinated, McCoy watched as the two Vulcans communicated without sound or words, and T'Atel reached with her own small hand to touch Spock's face.

The action ended quietly, without flourish. T'Atel sighed contently, nestled her head on Spock's shoulder and drifted peacefully off to sleep. McCoy smiled tiredly at Spock and said simply,

"Thank you, Mr. Spock."

Spock regarded the doctor in silence a moment and then responded. "Thank you Leonard. As you know, Vulcans hold all life sacred; but the life of a child -- a Vulcan child -- is especially precious to us. I do not know how so young a child was able to survive this long without the parental bond all Vulcan children must have. But I do know that were it not for the empathic bond she was able to establish with you, she would have been beyond help. On behalf of her kinsmen and all of Vulcan, I thank you, for both her sanity, and her life."

Despite himself, McCoy found his throat constricting. Spock had just paid him the highest of tributes among Vulcans. When he found his voice he responded gruffly. "Well, hell, what'd you expect me to do -- let her suffer like that?! Vulcan or not she's just a child!"

"Precisely my point Doctor."

McCoy looked puzzled, then embarrassed. "Sorry Spock. It's been a rough 4 weeks."

"I understand."

McCoy allowed his gaze to settle again to T'Atel. Vulcans were an incredibly tough species, and yet she looked so small and fragile stirring sleepily in Spock's arms. "I guess she won't be needing me anymore eh?" He said, unable to hide the regret in his voice.

"Quite the contrary Doctor. Her empathic bond with you, out of necessity ran quite deep. Therefore, until she is returned to Vulcan where her kin can establish a true parental bond, I thought it best not to disturb the link she has with you."

"What?" McCoy said, not quite comprehending.

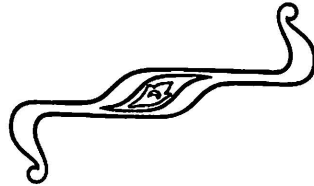
"I am asking for your assistance in caring for T'Atel until she is returned to family. She will need both of us."

McCoy looked as if someone had just splashed cold water in his face. Then a smile, a big smile lit his face. He reached over and tousled the still sleeping child's hair and in his best huffy manner replied gruffly,

"I'm a doctor, you know, not a babysitter."

"I'll take it that means 'yes'."

"Damn straight it does."



## ENTERPRISE

*by: Cheryl Resnick*

Silver lady, dressed in starlight, moonlight,  
Deathlight, countdown self-destruct.  
Silver lady, I give, she takes.  
I call the shots, she screams  
In the grip of explosion.  
Silver lady, my love, my ship,  
My craft, with stars to steer by.  
Computer, enter code 000 destruct, zero.  
My God, what have I done? What have I done?  
I watch her fly, fall, glide into her last  
Glistening trail.  
My heart burns as the bridge disintegrates.  
Oh, but it was a fair trade off,  
One love in death,  
For the life of another.

*Art: C. Hedge*

# THE SILENT DRUMMER

*By: Laurel Ridener  
& Lynn Syck*

"Come on, Spock," you laugh, "let's go mind the store," leaving me standing there like some backroom stock-boy while you two go off to the bridge to glories and applause and an embarrassingly maudlin round of back-patting.

I stare at the closed door, arms folded across my chest, controlling the insane compulsion to shout after you, 'Hey, what am I, chopped liver? You may have saved the universe again, Mr. Captain and Mr. First Officer, but I saved you!'

Not that anybody would have heard. Jealous McCoy? I ask, but drop the notion as foolish, and just let my hurt feelings sit and simmer a while, promising myself for the fiftieth time this month I'll go someplace where my talents and expertise will be truly appreciated, and where a man of my position and education can receive the accolades due him.

The offers are certainly there -- teaching those brilliant young minds at Starfleet Medical, lectures, research -- my choice, at the drop of a stargram.

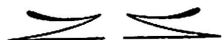
But then I firmly remind myself there's more to it than just my 'talents and expertise' that lets you two go off 'minding the store'. I bluntly ask myself -- would either of you have survived this time at the hands of somebody who loved you less? And next time?

The question is academic -- I'm not going anywhere; I fully intend to be here, combining that elusive ingredient with my knowledge and God-given talents to keep you both alive as long as I possibly can.

And glories?

The golden sound of your laughter is my applause, and that mischievous twinkle in Spock's eyes my accolade.

If there is a greater call to glory, I haven't heard it...







# CHRISTMAS

Where are you?

Why aren't you here to share this with him?  
He tries so hard to hide his hurt,  
to smile because he thinks that's what I want.  
He laughs at dinner, and plays with Peter,  
and yesterday helped decorate the tree,  
letting Peter put the star on top.  
But the old house doesn't laugh, and his  
eyes don't sparkle.

By: Laurel Ridener  
& Lynn Syck

Where are you?

I find him late at night,  
wistfully staring out across the  
silent snow-covered fields, that  
little-boy-lost smile on his lips.  
I want to take my son in my arms and  
hold him, but I dare not. I must  
never let my brave young Starship  
Captain know I saw that hurt little  
boy peeking out between the gold braids.  
He searches the midnight crystal stars...  
hoping, perhaps, one of them  
will be you.

Where are you?

I'm at a loss, it's a hurt even a mother  
can't soothe.  
I wish I could understand better, but I  
never had a friend to whom I entrusted  
by soul.  
Must it always be so painful?

*Art: The Southern  
Cross*

Where are you!

I don't even know you, and already I  
want to spank you!  
Would it have been so hard for you  
to share in this one silly human  
tradition with him?  
Even now he stands before the fire,  
lost in the beckoning, flickering  
depths, dreaming and wishing...  
not of anything I could grant him.

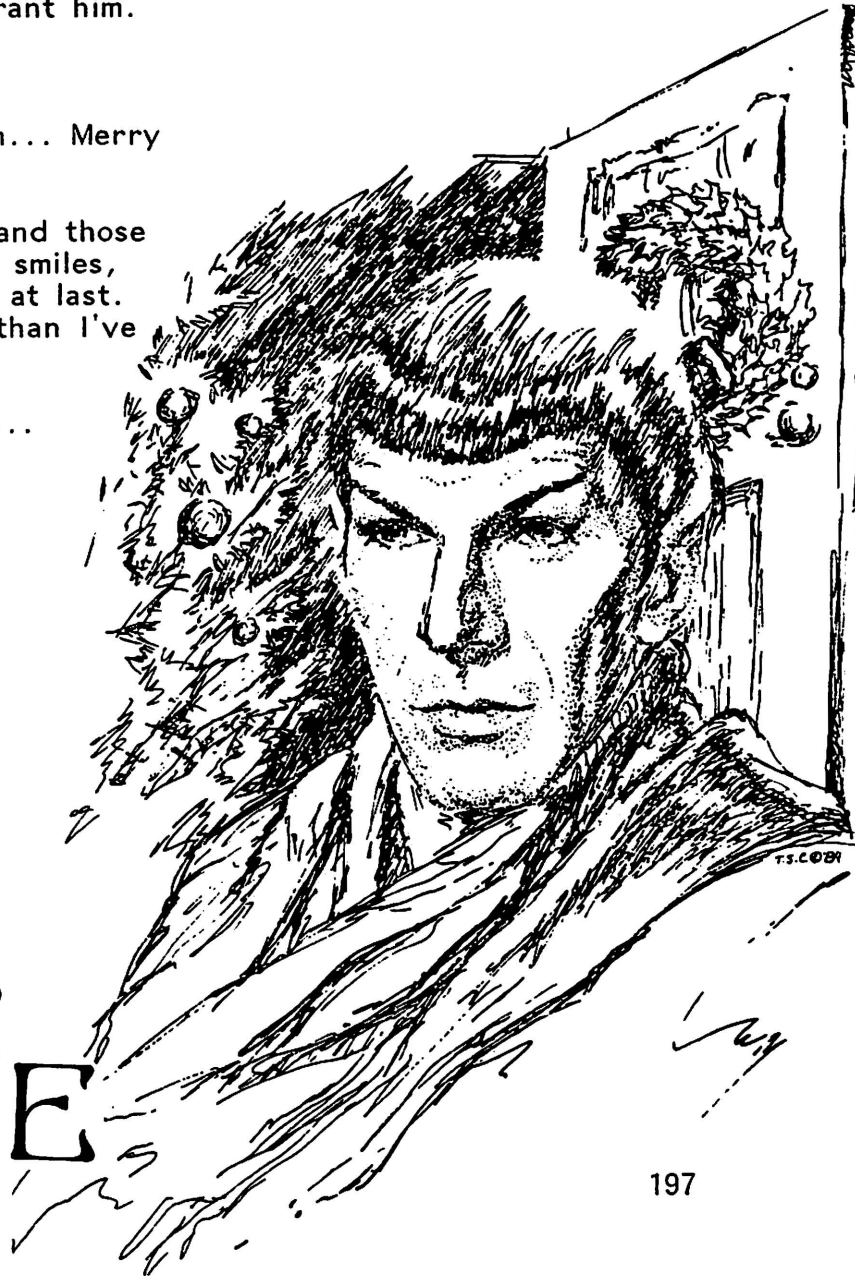
Where are you?

"If I may intrude, Captain... Merry  
Christmas?"

He slowly turns to face you and those  
eyes sparkle and he truly smiles,  
and this old house laughs at last.  
The stars shine brighter than I've  
ever seen them.

Merry Christmas, Mr. Spock...  
and welcome.

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# IN RETROSPECT

*Art: Christine Myers*

*By: Susan Meinecke*

As I watch you walk quickly away,  
though I am looking at your back,  
it is the memory of the look in your eyes  
which sticks in my mind;  
of the revealed truths which I am sure  
you would have preferred  
to keep hidden.

Such wistfulness denotes a vulnerability rarely shown  
and an unhappiness long ago accepted.

Have you ever stopped dreaming of the Enterprise  
or the years you were aboard her?

You never really mention her now  
except in passing.

Is it still too painful for you?

I have tried to help in the small ways I could  
to ease your readjustment into the admiralty  
and watched as you attacked your duties  
with approximately the same zeal that accompanies  
almost everything you do --

winning uncommon praise from your peers.

Your performance was so convincing that  
only now does the thought occur,  
it might not have been as genuine as it appeared  
but a ruse to detract any suspicions  
from those who know you so well.

Lulling even me into believing  
you were happy and satisfied,  
or so it seemed.

I know you are not displeased with my captaincy  
for it was your strong recommendations  
which were probably the deciding factor.

Not on that count or any other

is there contention between us,  
for if the Enterprise is to be in another's hands  
you would prefer them to be mine.

Still I sense this turn of mood

was not brought on totally by the state of your career.

This day though, as has been my previous experience,  
is supposed to be a happy one.

A birthday is certainly a good excuse for the celebrating  
Humans are so fond of.

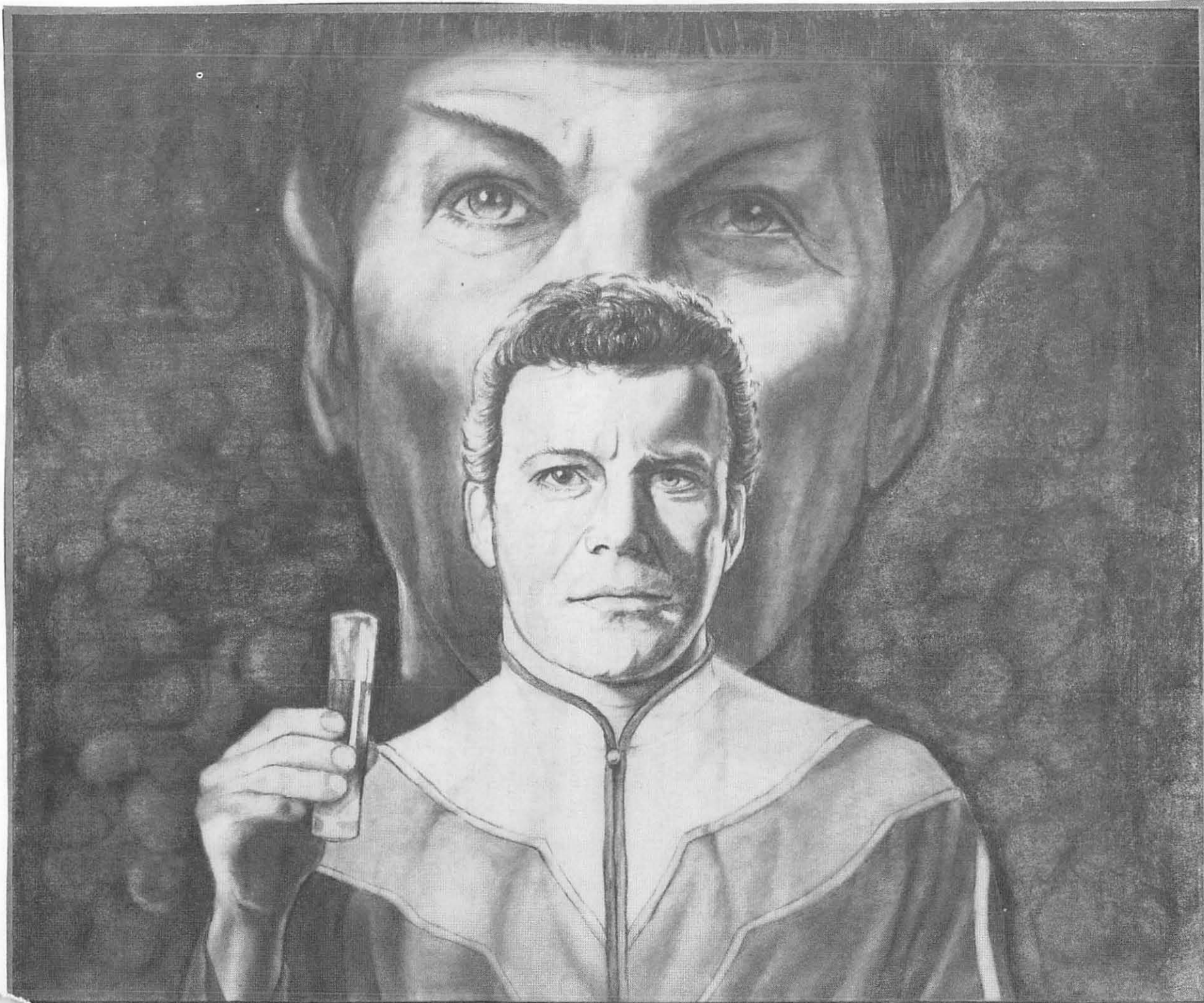
But your forlorn expression made it quite clear  
that celebrating was far from your mind.

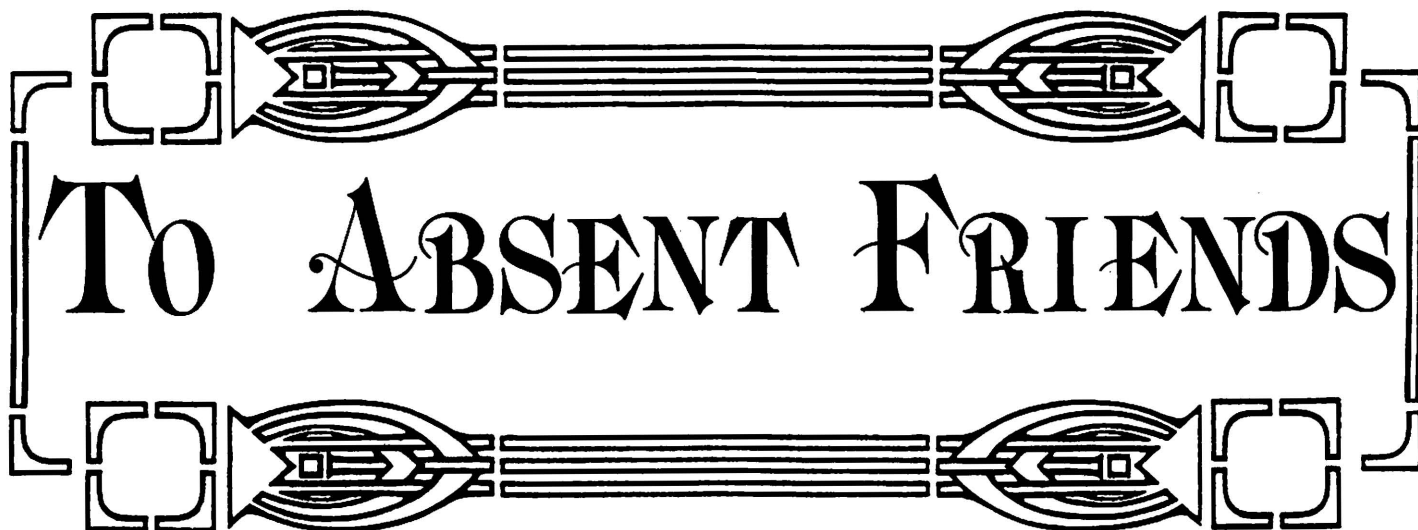
In retrospect my gift,

with which I thought you would be so pleased,  
was terribly inadequate,

and though I would give you anything,  
what you require I am completely powerless to give.







# To ABSENT FRIENDS

By: Sandy Zier

Art: Bev Zuk

Guilt, anger, helplessness --

Companions I had been prepared to live with  
for eternity

For I thought I had lost the one I truly loved  
to something that had been my doing.

Thus -- the guilt...  
for being glad you were at my side

-- the anger...  
at Kahn and your sacrifice

-- and the helplessness...  
over not knowing how my life would continue  
without you.

Feelings -- "Friends" -- I would have lived with  
willingly - as a constant reminder of what  
I had lost.

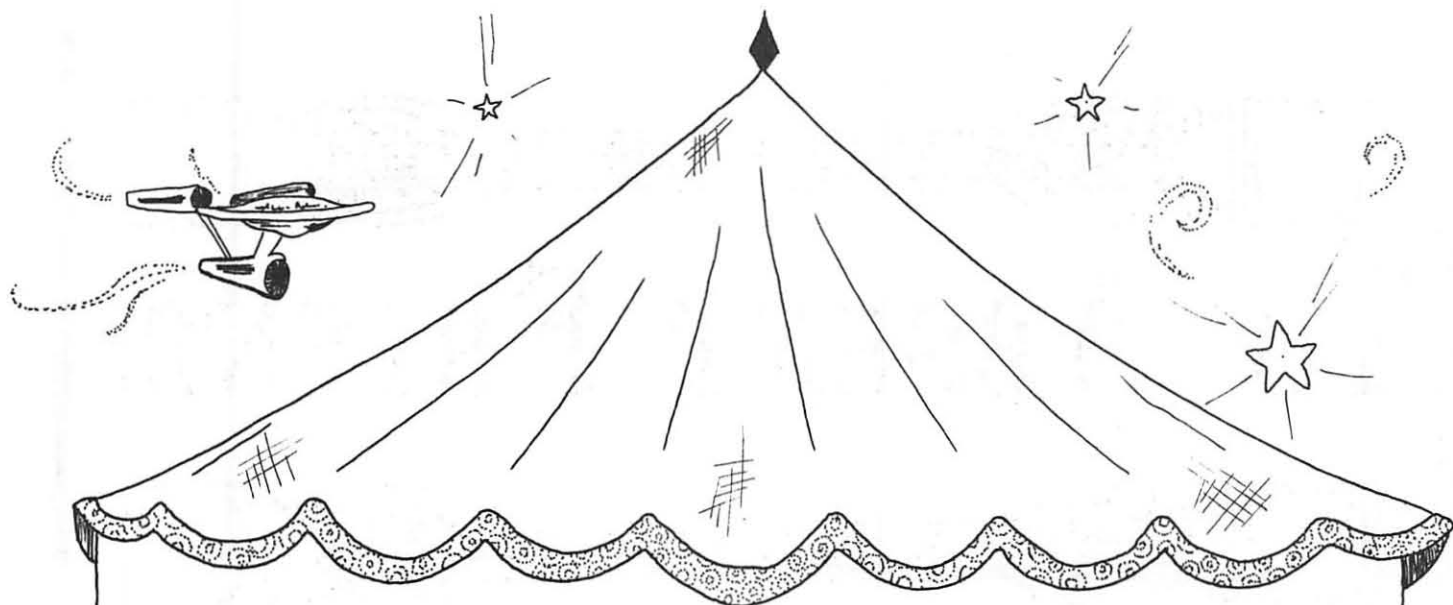
But then you willed them away

"Jim, your name is Jim."

And so, my old friend, I say,

"To absent Friends"

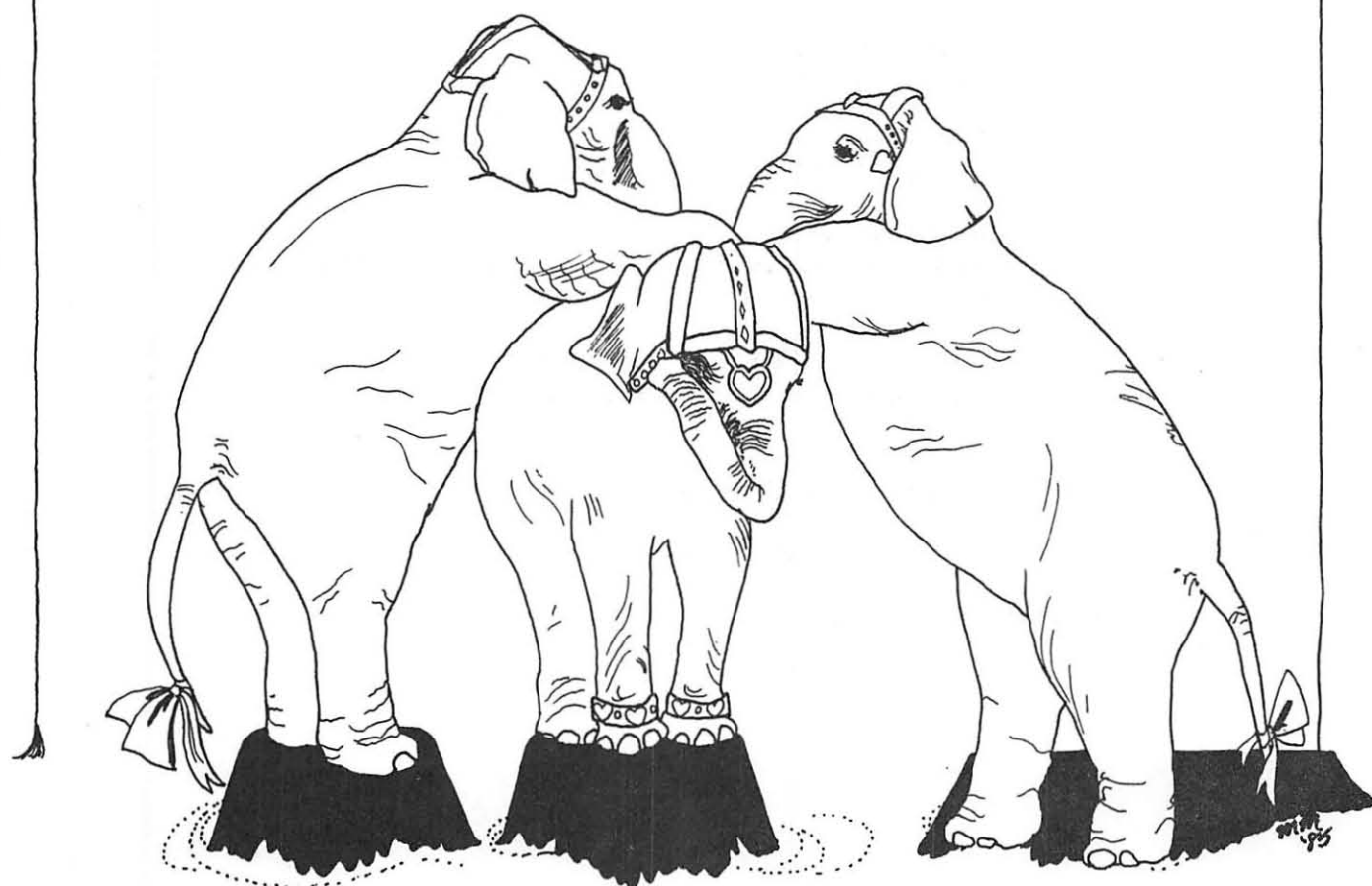


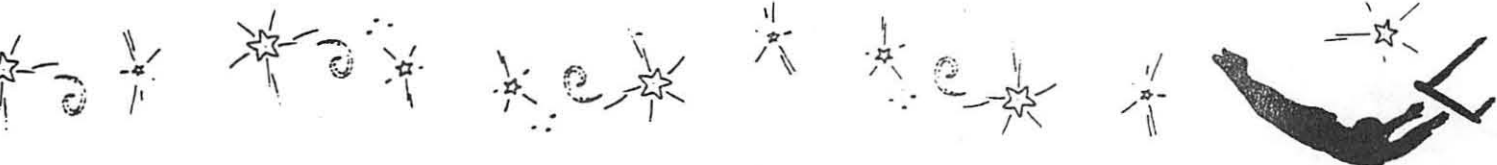


# SAWDUST

By: Beverly Volker &  
Nancy Kippax  
Title Page: Mary Mills

## IN THE STARS





"C'mon, you two, look alive. We're almost there." James Kirk was a full three strides ahead of his companions as he turned and waited for them to catch up. Spock and McCoy quickened their pace and fell into step beside him.

"Jim, this is supposed to be a shore leave -- Rest and Relaxation and all that stuff, you know," McCoy grumbled breathlessly as he struggled to keep up with his friend. "Don't know why you've got to have us runnin' around like hell's fire's behind us."

Kirk grinned, but didn't slow down. "You'll have plenty of time to relax when we get to the shop, Old Man. You can just sit back in a reclining chair and let your imagination do the work for you."

"Imagination, Jim?" Spock, his long legs having no problem with the fast walk, seemed more than a little dubious of his captain's latest scheme for an exciting shore leave.

"Well, perhaps not all imagination, Spock," Kirk qualified. "I'm not sure exactly how they do it. Some kind of hallucinogen, I suppose. But Gabe Evers told me it was perfectly safe and produced the wildest experience ever. He visited Time Place when the Exeter was here last year."

"Hmmm, Spock lost in an imaginative, wild, hallucinogenic experience is something I wouldn't miss for the world." McCoy couldn't resist the dig.

"I assure you, Doctor, I do not intend to get lost..."

"It's not like that at all, Bones," Kirk interrupted. "Time Place simply allows you to choose any place, any time in history, any situation and then they recreate it for you -- some way -- so that it seems to you as if you are actually there, actually participating. We'll pick something that we'll all enjoy."

"I have a feeling that could be the problem..." McCoy stopped short as suddenly in front of their line of vision there was a large, brightly colored sign over a rather ostentatious gateway proclaiming "TIME PLACE, WHERE BOTH MAKE A DIFFERENCE."

Without hesitation, Kirk led the way through the gate, where just inside was a fee collector. Kirk paid the correct amount of credits and the invisible force field blinked that it was off to let him pass through. Spock and McCoy did the same. Kirk was full of excitement, his friends catching on to his enthusiasm as they followed a short path to a small, plain building that hardly seemed bigger or more intriguing than some kind of storage warehouse. Looking at each other skeptically, they shrugged and passed through a small door.

Inside they found themselves in a huge ornately decorated room with mirrored walls, twinkling lights, tall, silver-metallic columns. The whole room seemed to glitter and pulsate, but one thing was certain. It could never have fit inside the building as seen from outside.





"Illusion, Captain." Spock verbalized what the two Humans suspected, but nevertheless all three men were wide-eyed with wonder.

"Very astute, Commander," a friendly voice from behind them said. They turned to face the speaker, a small, ruddy-cheeked, white-haired humanoid dressed in silver breeches and coat with a bright pink shirt and green bow-tie. "Welcome to Time Place, gentlemen." When he spoke his voice seemed to tinkle.

The little man, who introduced himself as Penguin, explained that he would be their Transformer and it was his job to prepare them for their journey into whatever time and place they wished to visit. When they indicated that they weren't certain where they wanted to go, Penguin pointed to little silver rectangles that lined the walls of the room. These were glimpses he told them, of some of the more popular places that customers liked to visit. He suggested that they browse for a while until they decided where they might wish to go.

For the next hour or so, Kirk, Spock and McCoy glimpsed in fascination at a myriad of moments in the histories of many of the Federation's leading Galactic Powers. A number of times one or the other of them would pick out a place, they would discuss it, then reject it for some reason. Kirk, staring into a silver rectangle called for his friends to join him.

"Look, here. I've found it!" Spock and McCoy looked. "Earth, United States, 1940, The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus."

"A circus?" McCoy wasn't convinced. "We've been to circuses."

"Not just a circus, Bones. The Greatest Show on Earth. Circus when it was at its best. A piece of Human History," Kirk was truly excited. "Circus has been a part of Man's existence since Ancient Times and this is it in a way we've never been able to see, only read about."

"I have never seen a circus," Spock said simply. Kirk and McCoy stared in disbelief.

"Spock, of course you have..." Kirk began.

"Oh Spock. I don't believe that," McCoy denied. Spock shook his head.

"What about that time on Canopus III when we all went..." Kirk began.

"I stayed aboard to help Mr. Scott repair a burned circuit system."

"We all visited that traveling show on Star Base IV," McCoy remembered.

"I had an appointment with Professor Magstrom."

"When you were a kid..." Kirk changed his mind. "No, I guess not. Spock, you've never been to a circus!"





"I believe that is what I said, Jim."

"Well, that cinches it. Bones, we've got to take Spock to a circus and this is the best of the best."

McCoy looked into the rectangle again. "Big Top, Midway, Menagerie. Good Lord this is circus in its heyday. I remember when I was a kid in Georgia..."

Kirk punched his arm. "Forget it Bones, even you don't remember this kind of show. So, how about it, Spock, would you like to visit a real, live outdoor circus?"

Spock's expression was one of tolerant affection. "You would like to visit the circus."

Kirk met his eyes, discovered. "Yeah, yeah, I guess I have to admit I've always been fascinated by the circus. When I was a kid, and of course it was nothing like this, I loved the circus and like most little boys, I dreamed of one day being a part of it. I grew up, of course, and my interests changed, but somewhere there's still a part of me that dreams of the magical life. Still part of a kid in me, I suppose."

"That's sure true," Bones looked up from the rectangle, his blue eyes twinkling teasingly, "Okay, Jim-Boy, if you two are game, I'm for it. A day at the circus might be fun, even if it is imaginary, illusionary, or whatever. Let's tell Penguin we've decided."



The Transformer, Penguin, smiled cheerily when his three charges told him of their choice. He led them down a short tunnel and into a small room. Kirk and McCoy took in their surroundings with happy anticipation. The room had canvas walls and a canvas ceiling so that it resembled the inside of an old fashioned tent. The floor was dirt, covered with a thick layer of sawdust. Piled around the "tent" were trunks, out of which spangled costumes seemed to spill, along with ropes, metal bars, and hardware which appeared to be some kind of rigging. In the corner was an overturned drum-shaped tub, once brightly painted but looking rather weather-worn, and a number of various-sized balls, also slightly faded in color. Penguin handed each of the men a pile of clothing and instructed them to change into the garb of the times. He left the room and returned in a few minutes. Kirk, McCoy and even Spock were dressed in typical streetwear of old USA in the 1940's and Spock's outfit also thoughtfully contained the proverbial casual cap to cover the tell-tale ears. Penguin held out a silver metallic box.





"Gentlemen, if you will deposit your own belongings in this, Time Place will put them in safekeeping until you return. Please be certain that you have nothing with you that belongs to this century or the trip will not be possible."

Kirk and Spock glanced at each other uneasily, reluctant to relinquish their communicators and personal ID's.

"Is that really necessary?" Kirk fingered the small black device that was the link to his ship. "If it's only a fantasy trip, what difference can it make?"

Penguin's eyes seemed to glow from some inner depth. "Who can say what is fantasy and what is reality. The two are often mistaken for each other." Then he smiled in reassurance. "Indeed, it will be quite safe, and to answer your question, yes, it is necessary. To set the mood, there must be nothing of your present time to distract you in any way from the experience into which you are about to enter."

Spock looked at his friend. "You did say that Captain Evers participated and enjoyed it immensely. And this place does have an excellent reputation throughout the Federation as a form of entertainment."

Kirk was not totally convinced. "I suppose you're right." He turned to Penguin. "How long will we be gone... uh... that is, will the illusion last?"

Again Penguin's eyes seemed to glow. "Time is relative, Captain. What is a year in one line might be the wink of an eye in another."

"We know that for sure, Jim." Kirk knew that McCoy was referring to the several occasions when they had crossed time barriers on their missions. Finally he nodded.

"Okay, I guess it's all right." He handed over the three communicators and their ID plates. "Now, what?"

Penguin produced a gold coin about the size of a silver dollar. Imprinted on one side were several strange looking symbols. The other side was an etching of a man's head. "This is your return key." He handed the coin to Kirk. "When you wish to end your journey, you must all three touch the coin with your right hands simultaneously. This is your only way back to the present, since you are venturing forth together." The three men exchanged amused glances at the sudden somberness of Penguin's expression. He was treating this as though they were going on a real journey into the past when they knew that their next step would be to be ushered into those reclining chairs which would transport them into a mind-trip of fantasy and fun. Suddenly the whole room was bathed in a violet glow and a cool beam of blue light washed over Kirk, Spock and McCoy.

"So that all will remain as it was meant to be." Penguin's voice seemed to come from far away. For a second their skin seemed to glow an iridescent blue, then the light faded and the room returned to normal.







Penguin stepped back, holding the box containing their clothes, communicators and ID's. "When you are ready, exit through that door." He indicated an aperture in the far wall that was covered by a canvas flap. "Enjoy your adventure, sirs."

Then, Penguin was gone, through the door he had entered. For a second that piece of wall seemed to shimmer, then the opening disappeared completely. The three men stood staring at it, amazed. Kirk shrugged.

"I know, illusion." He looked around and his eyes rested on the flap Penguin had indicated as their exit. "I guess the "dream room" is through there, gentlemen. Shall we..." From behind the tent's opening came the tinkling sound of an old musical instrument known as a calliope. Voices could also be heard and suddenly their room was filled with a mixture of smells, sweet and pungent, mingled to produce a unique sensation. Curiosity could be held off no longer. Kirk lifted the canvas flap and the three looked out on a magical, musical, laughter-filled world of colors, sights and sounds. They emerged, not into a "dreaming room" of the 23rd century with sensory provoking appointments and computer programmed couch, but on the bustling, crowd-packed, sawdust-covered thoroughfare of a twentieth-century small town. They were on the midway of Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth and the year was 1940. Kirk, Spock and McCoy shared apprehensive glances for a brief second, then all three relaxed. Time Place's reputation was justified. As an illusion, the effect was incredible, and even though they had been prepared for an exciting trip, this was in fact more realistic than they could have imagined. For all intent and purpose, it seemed that they had been sent on a journey into the past.

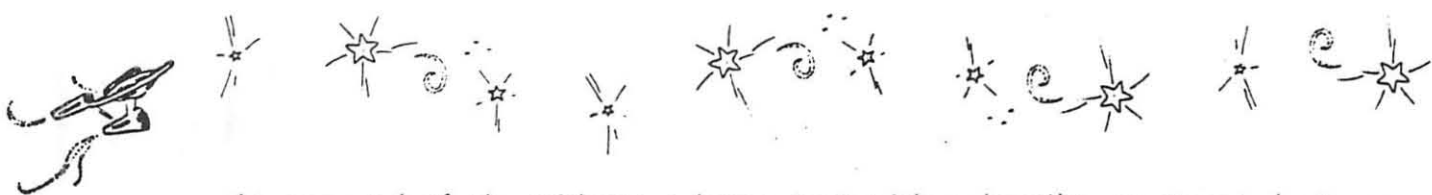


Hawkers lined the midway, their wares displayed to tempt and delight the local rubes who had come for a day with pockets full of native currency specifically intended for the procurement of a few hours of total pleasure. It was the intention of each hawker to separate the townfolk from that currency. To that end each booth offered something different in the way of entertainment. For a small, insignificant amount one could take a chance on the turn of the wheel to win a stuffed teddy bear or spangled kewpie doll. Huge mallets challenged the passerby to test his strength and ring the bell at the top of a 10-foot pole -- again for a treasured prize. Coins pitched with any degree of accuracy into shallow glass dishes would net the player a live goldfish swimming in its own bowl.

In addition to the games of chance, many booths offered a myriad of gastronomic delights to enhance your visit. Cotton candy, a spun pink confection, melted as soon as it met your mouth; and frozen custard, sweet, creamy and cold, melted in the midday sun and dribbled down crunchy cones in a sticky, delicious mess. The buttery smell of popcorn filled the air and when one had filled himself with these delights, he could wash it down with a semi-cold cup of weak lemonade. No one seemed to mind the imperfections. Circus Day came only once a year and there was barely enough time to make the most of it.







At one end of the midway a large tent with a hastily constructed stage in front proclaimed "Freak Show: Oddities from Around The Globe." On the stage a tiny man about the size of Alexander, was dressed in miniature black, formal attire and stood gazing up at an average size woman who was intently pushing a sword down her throat. A neatly dressed announcer in a red and white striped coat and straw hat was explaining how she had to curve her body so that the curved sword could go down.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy watched in wonder for a few moments until Spock, leaning over to Kirk asked in a stage whisper, "Why would she want to do that?" Kirk, scowled at the unperturbed Vulcan and whispered back in a less than serious tone that maybe she had a bone caught in her throat. Large canvas posters outside the tent promised that, for a fee, one could come inside and see the Tallest Man in the World, The Fattest Lady, a Human Pretzel, A Wild Man that was half animal and half human and a whole family of little people the same size as the tuxedo-clad midget on the stage.

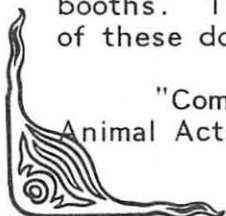


McCoy shook his head. "I think I'll pass on this one. I see enough strange sights on any given mission to keep my curiosity more than sated. I do wonder, though, if the circus' doctor has problems keeping all these different people healthy."

Kirk grinned. 'I don't know, Bones. I'll bet you could give him a few pointers.

They moved past the Freak Show Tent, back up the midway toward the other end. There was the largest tent of all, a giant sprawling construction of canvas, rope and poles. The royal blue top stretched above and beyond their line of vision, almost a reflection of the sky. From a line of tall, wooden poles used to fasten the center of the Big Top, flew brightly colored banners with the words 'Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Combined Shows' printed out across them. The entry way to this tent was a canopied isle, above which an earth-shaped logo identified this as The Greatest Show on Earth. The hands of a cardboard clock on a ticket booth at the entryway, pointed to the time of the next scheduled performance. Kirk checked the face of the watch which had been provided for him by Time Place and estimated that they had about a half hour to wait. In the pockets of the trousers they had been given, each man had been supplied with a wallet containing five dollars in twentieth century American money. They had spent approximately two of these dollars sampling the various offerings of the booths. The price of a reserved seat in the Big Top would cost them another of these dollars. Kirk didn't hesitate.

"Come on. This is the best part of the whole circus. Acrobats, Wild Animal Acts, Clowns. This is what I want to see."





They shelled out their money to the ticket seller and were told that their seats would be on Center Ring, row G. In anticipation, they entered the cool dimness of the tent's interior.

The wait was not long. As the rows of collapsible seats began to fill with spectators, in one corner a noisy conglomerate of scarlet-uniformed musicians began tuning their brass instruments. The tent lights dimmed and a single spot revealed in the center of three rings a flamboyant master of ceremonies, his black boots gleaming beneath a pair of dazzling white riding breeches. His red coat, white silk ascot and shiny black top hat completed the picture of an equestrian dandy, but instead of a riding crop he held a small microphone, through which his voice reverberated.

"Children of all Ages, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus welcomes you to the 1940 edition of The Greatest Show on Earth! Let the performance begin! Merle, strike up the circus band!"

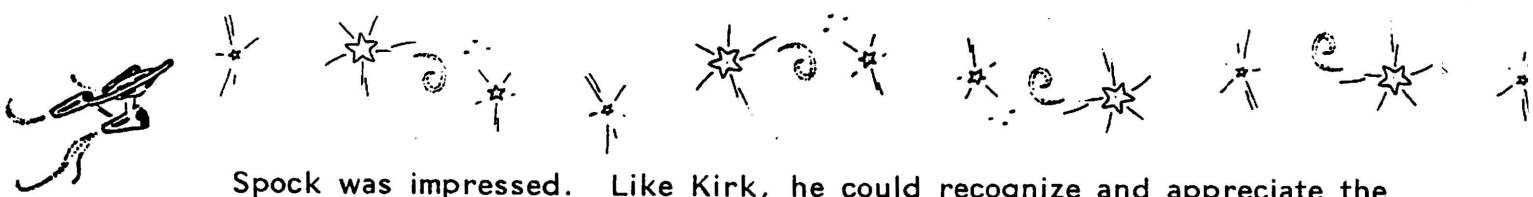
The music began, sounding slightly tinny, slightly off-key. It was nonetheless loud, exciting and enthusiastic, and the entire hippodrome track was suddenly filled with high stepping horses, clowns in white and black face and garish costumes, petite women in fluffy cloud-like skirts and men wearing acrobatic tights and flowing capes. The opening parade circled the tent like a dazzling whirlwind and the audience was hooked, starship captains, medics and first officers notwithstanding.

The announcer had been correct, they were children again, age not even being a consideration. For the next two hours, the men of space who had seen more sights than most could expect in a dozen lifetimes, sat enthralled by the spectacle unfolding before them. Caught up in the flavor and mood of the whole experience, they could see how each act, unique unto itself, was still a part of a greater whole. Men and women displayed their athletic abilities and talents in and above all three rings and yet they were one with the performing animals, the ever-present brass band, the glitter and sequins and even the sawdust which seemed to be everywhere.

Kirk enjoyed it all, his own exuberant personality, when he was able to be away from shipside responsibilities, being the perfect object of the circus' direction. He had a healthy respect for the work and practice that was necessary to make the entire show appear to be a smooth and effortless fun-filled exhibition. It was not unlike the drills and daily practice runs that had made the Enterprise perform as a single, well-oiled unit in an emergency.

McCoy was intrigued with the people. Obviously from different backgrounds, language and custom seemed not be a barrier as they worked together. From their appearances, McCoy imagined that many had left their native countries, perhaps up-rooted entire families, to become a part of a community that moved from town to town almost daily. Yet there seemed to be a sense of security and permanency that almost appeared incongruous with their mobile lifestyle. The people seemed healthy, certainly in excellent physical condition, and McCoy knew that they were motivated by a loyalty and devotion to what they were doing. Perhaps, he thought, there might be one man who leads this entire operation, too.





Spock was impressed. Like Kirk, he could recognize and appreciate the effort that had to have gone into producing such a cohesive end result. He had agreed to this excursion into the old circus because of Kirk. Now, however, he was beginning to catch a glimpse of why this Human form of entertainment had survived not only centuries on Earth, but Man's venture into space as well. He had been curious about why a talented performer, one with true athletic ability would expend so much energy on a function which was designed specifically to amuse and charm an unknowledgeable audience. The show had revealed the circus as an authentic form of art and the performers as artists. The Big Top was their canvas as surely as any printer's easel and each display was a marriage of sight and sound, a joining of precision and pomposity to create a lasting impression of beauty, grace and skill. Kirk had been right. The Circus was something that everyone should experience at least once in a lifetime.

The performance was drawing to a close as the Ringmaster announced the final act before the closing spectacle.

"... Drawing your attention high above the arena, a dazzling display of aerial artistry. Over the center ring, France's Famed Flying Family, the Unequaled, Unbelievable Bordeaux, performing Breathtaking Flights of Fantasy, defying the Earth-bound Limitations of Wingless Creatures..."

Somehow, incredibly, while the clowns' zany antics had been holding the audience's attention during one of their many walk-ons, a huge net had been raised over the center ring and from the tent-top rigging, two swinging trapezes had been lowered to sway temptingly thirty feet in the air. At the cue from the announcer, three men and two women entered the ring. Each one was wearing a shimmering, green satin cape and wooden mules -- high, slip on shoes designed to keep delicate ballet slippers free of the grounds' debris. They moved as one, with the precision of a drill team and at some unseen command, removed their capes with a flourish of bright purple lining. Underneath the capes, the men wore purple tights with glittering gold belts. The two women's costumes were gold with short netty skirts and purple baubles encrusting the bodices. The troupe stepped out of their mules and two of the men and the women began a long climb up a rope ladder to a perch at one end of the rigging. The third man ascended a rope to a small trapeze on the opposite end. Sitting in the catch trap, he swung easily back and forth as if waiting for the others to reach the top.

When all of the flyers were aloft, the band went into a surprisingly melodious rendition of the Crimson Petal Waltz and all eyes were fixed on the almost ethereal beings over their heads.

The Ringmaster's flamboyant introduction of the act proved that while perhaps a bit overstated, it was not far from the truth. The flyers did indeed seem to have wings as they defied Earth's gravity in leaps, pirouettes and somersaults from a swinging bar to the catcher's hands and back again. The music stopped, a drumroll produced a hush from the spectators and one young man swung out high, higher, then let go into one, two, two and a half somersaults before being caught by his ankles by the strong grip of the man hanging upside down and waiting. The timing was perfection and the crowd





cheered as the music once more resumed and the flyer reached out to grasp the carefully placed return trapeze.

One of the women and the other young man did a passing leap in mid-air, crossing each other in opposite directions, then returning simultaneously on the same bar to the perch. The carefully constructed safety net was used finally at the end of the act when each member took turns returning to the ground by somersaulting, twisting and diving one at a time from the trapeze into the yielding flexibility of the criss-crossed rope. When all five performers were safely on the ground, they ran as one to the ring bank and took their bows with up-stretched arms.

The Enterprise's men joined the wild applause for a truly magnificent performance. As the rest of the men and women joined the flyers around the rings for their final bow, the Ringmaster announced that the show was over, "... and May All Your Days Be Circus Days!"

Kirk's eyes were shining with awe as they joined the crowd slowly filing toward the exits.

"That was absolutely great. And that last act was... was, I don't know... incredible," He was a small boy at the circus and he turned to his Vulcan friend. "Well, what did you think, Spock. Your first circus?"

"It was... unique." The pleasure in Spock's tone belied the simplicity of his words.

"I have to admit it certainly was different than any circus I've ever been to." McCoy was surprised.

"Of course, Bones. Nothing that's inside a building, carefully staged and synthesized can compare to this. There are shows and there are shows, but this is a total... experience. Live people, animals, the elements... They had reached the tent's exit and found they had gone out through a back door so that now they were in an area where the props and floats and equipment was kept. Maintenance people and performers, some of them still in costume and/or make-up ambled effortlessly around, some doing personal things like laundry or sewing, others talking with visitors who also had wandered onto the circus back lot. Trailer-like wagons, the homes of many of the performers, stood parked in a little cluster like a residential neighborhood.

"You know," Kirk stopped walking and looked around. "I'd like to find that Flying Bordeaux family and tell them personally how much I enjoyed their act. I'll bet they have a wagon around here." Without waiting for a reply, he marched up to a man dressed in street clothes but wearing part of a clown's face and asked directions to the flyer's wagon. The clown pointed the way and Kirk took off, knowing Spock and McCoy would follow.

At the Bordeaux wagon, Kirk reached up to knock on the closed door. A young woman answered and Kirk recognized the slim figure of one of the two female flyers. She was still in costume but had put on a white robe over her tights. Kirk smiled his most charming smile at her.





"Miss Bordeaux?"

She seemed distracted as she nodded almost absently at him. "Yes, what can I do for you?" Her voice was soft, lilting with a French accent.

"I... that is, we..." Kirk indicated his two companions, "saw your performance and wanted to tell your family how much we enjoyed it."

She looked into his eyes, seeming to notice him at last and smiled warmly.

"Why, thank you. My father is inside" she glanced over her shoulder. "Perhaps you will wish to tell him." Without waiting for a reply, she turned and spoke to someone in the wagon.

"Papa, some gentlemen are here who wish to express their appreciation of our performance." A male voice answered in French and the girl turned back to Kirk. "Papa says to come inside, please."

The interior of the trailer was dim after the glaring sun, but when their eyes adjusted, they could see that it was furnished in a simple, homey style. The man who had been the catcher, somewhat older yet muscular and trim, sat at a round oil-cloth covered table, a plate of thick bread and cheese before him. The other woman from the act, Kirk could now see was also older, though still petite. Dressed in a robe like the younger woman, she was pouring coffee from a blue and white marbled metal pot. One of the two younger men from the act sat on a flower-patterned couch across the room, tugging at the white wrappings still fastened to his wrists. The young woman made the introductions.

"My father, René Bordeaux and my mother, Annette. This is my brother Tristan and I am Desirée, but most Americans call me Desi."

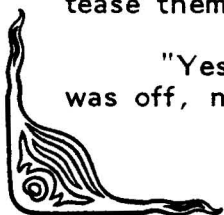
René Bordeaux looked up at Kirk, Spock and McCoy, his clear blue eyes twinkling "So you caught the act, eh?" his French accent was thick but his English was quite understandable.

"Yes, sir, we did." Kirk answered. "My name is Jim Kirk and these are my friends, Spock and Leonard McCoy. We wanted to tell you how good we thought it was."

René's eyes still twinkled teasingly "Ah, so you know good flying when you see it, do you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "So what did you think of the two and a half? Did you notice how I had to stretch out to grab his ankles because his timing was almost a second off? Did you see how that put him a full second late leaving for the bar so that the return was unbalanced?"

Kirk didn't answer, but Desi broke in. "Oh, Papa, stop it. Don't tease them so. They just wanted to tell us how they liked the show."

"Yes, Papa," Tristan spoke from the couch. "Even if D'Arcy's timing was off, now is not the time to discuss it."







René broke into a wide smile, his salt and pepper mustache spreading across his face.

"Of course, you are both right." He looked at Kirk. "Forgive me. I could not resist." Kirk nodded and René turned to his wife.

"Mama, bring out some more mugs. Perhaps these gentlemen will join us in a cup of coffee."

Kirk, Spock and McCoy found seats around the room, and were handed steaming mugs of a thick, black brew, lightened with rich cream. Tristan went through a curtained doorway to change his clothes in another room.

"So, are you from this town?" René asked.

Kirk shook his head. "As a matter of fact, we're not. We were... uh, passing through and decided to see the circus."

"Well, this is a two-day stand. We'll be here till tomorrow evening before we move on." René told them.

Tristan emerged dressed in brown street clothes. He was a small young man, as a flyer had to be, but with well developed muscles. He addressed his sister.

"C'mon, get changed Desi, and we'll catch a ride into town if you want to shop for that book you wanted before tonight's show."

Desi looked uncertain. "Maybe we ought to look for D'Arcy first and see if he wants to come with us."

"You know he won't," Tristan told her. "The way he stormed out of here after the show, he won't turn up again until this evening's performance."

Annette looked ruefully at her husband. "René, you should not have said anything to him about his timing. You could have waited until later."

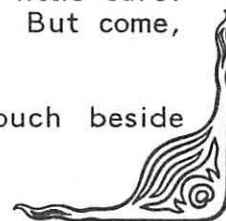
René's eyes grew hard. "When you see a mistake, then is the time to talk of it, not after it is forgotten. The boy has to learn. How will he ever master the triple if he can't recognize his problems with other tricks?"

Tristan's voice was soft, not feminine like Desi's, but gentle with a deep timbre like his father.

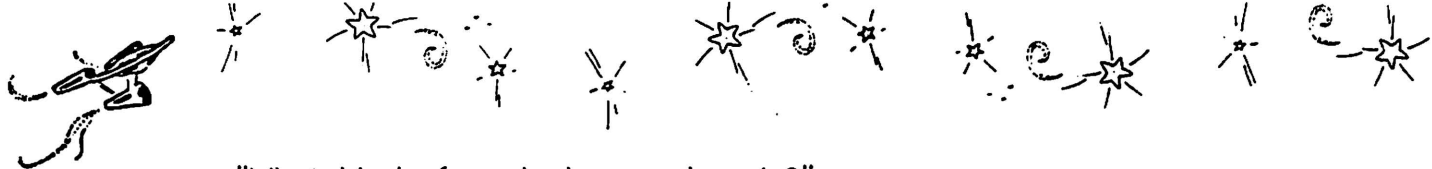
"Mama just meant that D'Arcy's been so... so tense lately, that perhaps we should take a little care how we criticize."

René looked hard at his son. "You mean I should take a little care. All right, all right. I'll try to be more careful in the future. But come, let's not voice our family problems in front of our guests."

Desi went to change and Tristan took a seat on the couch beside McCoy.







"What kind of work do you do, sir?"

"I'm a doctor," McCoy answered without hesitation.

Just at that moment, the door to the wagon was slammed open and the fifth member of the flying troupe came through.

D'Arcy Bordeaux, dressed rather haphazardly in street clothes and wielding a brown bottle of beer in his hand, looked less like the graceful flyer of the circus and more like an angry young man. His eyes glittered hard as he faced his father.

"Why did you tell Santos Armando not to give me a ride into town this afternoon?"

René glared back at his son. "Because I knew you would find the first local tavern and take up residence there."

D'Arcy smiled in mocking good humor. "Well, Papa, dear, as you can see, your little ploy has not worked. I have my own sources for liquid refreshment right here on the lot."

René lowered his eyes in disgust. "Then you will not fly tonight."

D'Arcy crossed the room and slammed his fist on the table to draw René's attention.

"You let me be the judge of whether I can fly or not. Do you think I don't know what I can do before it will affect my performance? I am not a baby!"

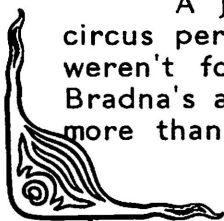
René met the boy's gaze. "Then stop acting like one. One drop of alcohol is too much. Drinking and flying do not mix. Do you think I will let you jeopardize all our lives because you go up there with your perception clouded. I am still in charge of this family and the act and you will not touch a trapeze in this condition."

Tristan rose and crossed to his brother. "D'Arcy, let it be. Go take a shower, get some rest. Maybe we'll talk later."

D'Arcy shook his head. "He won't talk later. His mind is made up. You heard him. He is in charge, he runs the family, he runs my life. Well, I'm sick of it. The Great Flying Bordeaux, hah, what a joke!"

René stood up, his eyes glinting angrily. He glanced uneasily toward Kirk, Spock and McCoy, apparently uncomfortable that they should witness this family dispute, then seemed to decide that it could not be helped.

"A joke, eh?" His voice was menacing. "Three generations of fine circus performers and you call it a joke! Well let me tell you, boy, if it weren't for this family's reputation, we'd have been out long ago. Mr. Bradna's aware of your... problem and he won't tolerate it on this show any more than I will in the air. It was only because of sixty years of circus





stars that he trusted me to take care of it in my own way. But, by God, I will not see the Flying Bordeaux hacking out in some damn mud-show because your behavior had us fired from the Greatest Show on Earth."

"Damn your family and their sixty years and three generations," D'Arcy moved around the table to stand in front of Rene. He was just slightly shorter than his father. "And damn your Mr. Bradna and damn this Greatest Show on Earth." Tears were running down his face. "What do I care about all that. I am me. Me, do you hear. I have a life. I am an individual. You can take your flawless flying act and shove it -- right along with all those other empty-headed soldiers who lived only for the circus."

René reached out and slapped D'Arcy across the mouth. "You will not speak to me like that and you will not defile the memories of your family."

D'Arcy fell back under the impact of the blow against Tristan who tried to grab his arms. He turned swinging the beer bottle, but Tristan ducked. Kirk and Spock both dove to subdue the boy, who had gone wild and seemed bent on destroying something.

The beer bottle caught Spock on the side of the head and he toppled backward. D'Arcy managed to elude Kirk's lunge and as Spock fell, he turned, frozen for a moment. Kirk caught himself to keep from landing on his face as D'Arcy fled the wagon, leaving the door hanging open behind him.

McCoy was instantly at Spock's side, having been moving toward him even as the bottle had impacted with his skull. Spock was dazed and as Kirk gathered himself up, he too knelt beside the Vulcan, the Bordeaux temporarily forgotten in his concern for his friend. A large welt was beginning to form on the side of Spock's head, but he raised up to a sitting position on the floor of the wagon while McCoy took a closer look. He did not seem to be seriously hurt and his momentary loss of awareness was clearing. Annette Bordeaux, an expression of deep concern on her face, hovered over the men.

"Is he all right. Can I do something?"

McCoy looked up. "Ice" he said. "Can you get me some ice for the swelling?" She nodded and turned toward an insulated chest in the corner. Desi had come into the room during the altercation and now Tristan moved to reassure her that it was over. René sat back down at the table and hung his head.

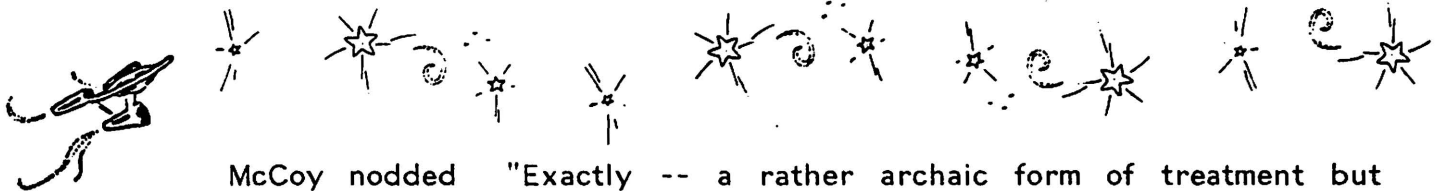
"Bones?" McCoy could hear the worry in Kirk's voice.

"Doesn't look too serious, Jim."

"The injury is superficial," Spock tried to reassure.

"You let McCoy be the judge of that," Kirk told him gently. He turned as Annette approached with a towel filled with ice and took it from her. "Here, Bones. Do you want to let him hold it against the swelling?"





McCoy nodded "Exactly -- a rather archaic form of treatment but effective, nonetheless. Spock, just sit there a few minutes till you get your bearings, then you can get up."

Kirk started to stand, then reached over to pick up Spock's cap, which had come off during the struggle. Too late, the spacemen realized that the Vulcan ears were exposed and that the Bordeaux had to have seen them. He stood lamely, holding the useless cap and looking at the family, who were looking at Spock. The expressions on their faces were only ones of concern, however, and if they wondered about the difference, they chose not to mention it.

"He'll be all right." Kirk offered by way of explanation.

"How can I apologize," René said sadly from the table. "I am sorry for what my son did, what I did -- sorry you had to be a part of this." His distress was evident.

"No, it's all right," Kirk shook his head. "It wasn't your fault. As soon as Spock is a little less shaky, we'll be going."

"Please," René's sincere eyes met Kirk's. "Let us make it up to you. Tell us what we can do."

"Nothing, really. It's all right. I'm just sorry it happened!"

Tristan moved toward them. "At least let Mama fix you something to eat. Stay for the evening performance as our guests. I have to go look for D'Arcy." His eyes told Kirk that he wanted them to stay, that he had to leave and that their presence would act as a buffer for his parents. Understanding, Kirk looked questioningly toward McCoy, who had also seen the exchange.

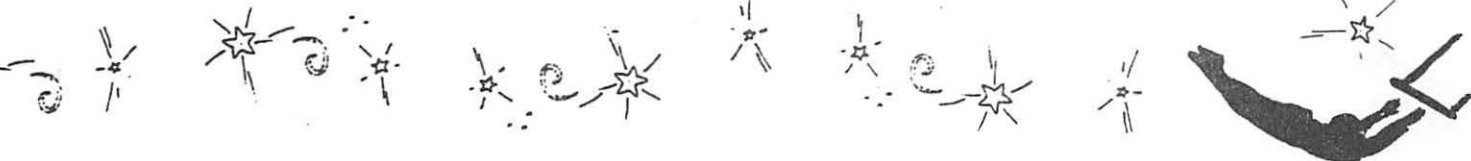
"Spock could use some food and some rest before he has to get moving," McCoy gave Kirk the answer and the Captain turned to René.

"Very well. We thank you for your hospitality. It isn't necessary, but we accept."



The meal was light, simple food, but nourishing and delicious. Flyers did not ingest large dinners before a performance. Later, after the show, there would be bottles of rich red wine and roast beef on warm French bread. Tristan didn't stay to eat at all; he left to look for D'Arcy as he had said. His concern for his brother was apparent, as was that of the whole family. In fact, they were all warm, caring, nice people and Kirk decided that D'Arcy must be just a young man with growing pains.





It was fascinating for the three Enterprise men to spend an afternoon with the Bordeaux Family and Kirk reveled in this glimpse behind the Tinsel World of the Big Top.

René told them proudly of his family and Annette's, many of whom were troupers in some of the European circuses. They had both been born to the circus, carrying on a tradition that was not unique among circus families. Desi, Tristan and D'Arcy would carry on this tradition as well. René told them that while he was proud of all three of his children's abilities, D'Arcy was by far the best. He had a natural talent that seemed to set him apart from the average. If he didn't throw away his chance, he could be another Alfredo Codona, one of the greatest flyers of all time. But D'Arcy was young and headstrong and, at this point in his life, unable to appreciate his potential. Kirk could see the love the father had for his youngest son as he spoke of him. He hoped D'Arcy would soon learn to understand that.

An hour before showtime Tristan returned. Kirk could see by his face that his search had not been successful.

"Come, I'll walk over to the ticket wagon and have them give you passes for the show, then I'll have to come back and dress." Tristan didn't mention his fruitless afternoon, but they all knew... and worried.

When the Flying Bordeaux performed that evening, there were four members. A different audience, the spectators would never know that the act was anything but usual. They were showy, brandishing their capes with enthusiasm and smiles. The act itself was brilliant. Tristan and Desi each did a few extra tricks to compensate for D'Arcy's absence and they were bright, on cue, and precise.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy felt a kinship with the circus since they were the only ones outside the show who were aware of the 'daring-young-man-on-the-flying-trapeze' who wasn't there. Afterward, Kirk said he'd like to go back to the Bordeaux to say good-bye, then they would return to Time Place. Their adventure with the circus had been worth the trip, they all agreed, and Spock decided that even the bump on the head had been worth it. At the Bordeaux wagon, they said their farewells, almost sorry that they weren't staying, reluctant to leave these people and this improbable life. The Bordeaux would never have understood the stars, would never have dreamed of a life out there. They flew through the sky but their feet were planted in sawdust. Tristan told them that D'Arcy was home, that he had apparently come in sometime during the show and that he was asleep. For the time being, all was calm with the Bordeaux.

The stars which called the three men glittered brightly in the night sky as they made their way across the back lot toward the tent through which they had entered this fantasy world. The mid-way was dark; the townfolk had gone home to bed. The sound of milling horses could be heard as they passed the menagerie tent, but most of the animals were asleep, too. As they entered the supply tent, Kirk paused for a last look around -- the stars, the midnight sky, the muffled sounds and the smells which still clung to the air -- for a brief moment he almost wished... He turned and entered the tent.





"We can come again," Spock said quietly. "We can visit Time Place..."

Kirk grinned. "Next year, huh? Just like the circus -- once a year."

"It might be something to consider." Kirk peered at Spock. The Vulcan had enjoyed this more than he was letting on.

Kirk reached into his shirt pocket for the coin that was their return ticket to Time Place. With a perplexed frown, he pulled out his empty fingers. He shoved both hands into his trouser pockets, fished around for a few minutes and withdrew a dollar bill, two quarters and three nickels. The Time Place coin was not there. Seeing Kirk's bewilderment, Spock and McCoy began to feel in their pockets for the important coin. A few minutes later, all pockets and cuffs checked and rechecked, Kirk stood back with his hands on his hips.

"Shit!" he exchanged a worried glance with Spock and McCoy.

"It can't be that important. The hallucinogen has to wear off on its own eventually." McCoy didn't sound too convincing.

Kirk rubbed the back of his neck. "Spock, Bones, do you remember being given anything at Time Place, any kind of drug or treatment?" He didn't give them a chance to answer. "That little man, Penguin -- stop and think for a moment what he said."

"... Be certain that you having nothing with you of this century or the trip will not be possible." Spock remembered.

"Who can tell what is fantasy and what is reality," McCoy supplied.

"Time is relative. What is a year in one line might be the wink of an eye in another," Kirk finished. "And there was that blue light... my, God..."

They all knew at once. "There were no couches, no mind-altering conditions," Spock whispered.

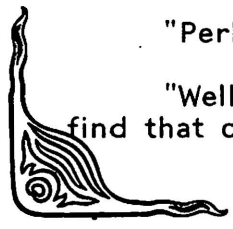
"Only there and then and here and now," still McCoy couldn't voice it.

Time Place's reputation was a fraud, however well-intentioned. They had no magic illusions. They had discovered a way to execute Time Travel and every venturesome client into the past could be a potential hazard. With all those people loose in history, anyone at any time might change it. Yet Time Place had been operating successfully for several decades.

"We just don't know." Kirk shook his head. "Damn, why didn't we realize sooner."

"Perhaps because we wanted to believe," Spock told him.

"Well, we've got to get back to find out, and to do that, we've got to find that coin."





"It could have fallen out during that skirmish at the Bordeaux!"

"Or when you were swinging the mallet on the midway." McCoy's voice sounded less than hopeful.

"Or when you were pitching those coins into plates," Spock remembered. McCoy groaned.

"Oh, God, maybe you pitched the wrong coin."

Kirk shook his head. "No, no. I had it when we were in the Big Top. I remember checking. I know it was there up until we went to the Bordeaux, then I was kind of distracted and didn't think to look for it again until now. So, let's not panic, gentlemen. Let's be logical about this and go back to where it possibly could have fallen. It probably rolled under something and is lying unnoticed on the floor of their trailer."

It wasn't. Kirk, Spock and McCoy had gone back to the Bordeaux's. Only Annette and René were there, D'Arcy was still asleep and Desi and Tristan had gone with a group from the circus to listen to some music at a roadside inn. Kirk explained that he had lost a rare and valuable coin and suspected he may have dropped it there. For the next half hour, they all searched the small room intently but the coin was not found.

Seeing that Kirk's nerves were beginning to wear thin, Mama Bordeaux put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Come, you have already looked in that same place three times. It is getting late and you look tired. I will fix you some hot milk and you will relax. Tomorrow morning we can go to the lost and found wagon to see if someone turned it in..."

"Tomorrow?" Kirk mumbled, uncertain.

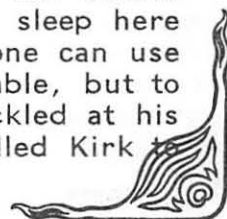
"If it is so unusual as you say, only another coin collector would recognize its value. If anyone from the circus found it, they will turn it in. Circus people are honest."

Spock sat back on his heels and sighed, seeing his captain's distress.


"She is right, Jim. The coin is not here and there is nothing further we can do at this time to search for it. It has been a long day."

McCoy didn't add what he was thinking, that although circus people might be honest, there had been an awful lot of townspeople on the lot all day, and any one of them might have gone home with a piece of the future in their pocket. And they would not have realized what they had.

René, used to being in charge, folded his arms across his chest. "Then it is settled. Mama will give you hot milk and you will sleep here tonight. There is not much room but that chair lays back and one can use the couch. We have plenty of comforters to make the floor tolerable, but to see which one gets that, you will have to flip a 'coin.'" He chuckled at his own joke. Then in a more serious tone, he reached down and pulled Kirk to







his feet. "We will ask Desi and Tristan when they come in if they have seen it. Do not worry, Jim. It will turn up, and in the meantime you are safe and... at home here with my family.

Kirk didn't sleep. Annette and René went to bed. McCoy took the couch, Spock the floor and Kirk lay back in the reclining chair, pulling a blanket up to his chin. When Tristan and Desi tiptoed in, they were surprised by their three unexpected guests. Kirk told them about the coin but they hadn't seen it. After they went to bed, Kirk tossed and fidgeted. He knew Spock was also awake, although the Vulcan was still.

"Any ideas about how to get back if we don't find the coin, Science Officer?" Kirk kept his voice low.

"I have been applying my mental abilities to that end, Captain."

"He means he's been thinking about it," McCoy mumbled sleepily from the couch. Spock ignored the dig.

"I have been trying to remember exactly what Penguin told us before we left. He called the coin a "key." But Captain, people lose keys. There has to be more than one way to open a door."

"So, do you think you can find a way to pick the lock?"

"If the coin is not at the lost and found in the morning, I will return to the supply tent and examine it carefully. Since that is the portal through which we entered, there may be some clue as to how to reverse the process."


Kirk took a deep breath, not completely satisfied with Spock's solution but knowing of no better one.

"All right, but it just looked like a tent to me. Spock, if we... if we don't get back right away, how do you think that will affect the Enterprise? I mean, how long before they start looking for us, missing us?"

Spock considered "Jim, since we are actually Time Travelers, it is possible that however long we are here won't have counted at all in our time. We have found that to be true in past encounters. Remember how long it seemed when we went through the Guardian or into Sarpeidon's past. In reality we were hardly gone a few minutes.

Kirk remembered the painful incidents but Spock was right and the thought was reassuring. Spock continued as another idea occurred to him.

"Jim, did you mention to anyone where we were going?" Kirk's answer was immediate as the same idea occurred to him.



"Yes. Yes, I told Scotty because I thought I could get him to come with us, but he wouldn't leave his engines. And Sulu was there too. He was telling me that a cousin of his had gone to Time Place. He would have come but he had other plans for the shore leave. So, Spock, if we do turn up missing, all they have to do is go to Time Place and they will have a log of where we are. They can come after us.



Spock nodded. "You said Captain Evers told you it was completely safe."

"That's true -- he didn't elaborate but it does seem strange that in all the time they've been sending people back, nothing serious has happened. Of course, we can't know for certain that history hasn't been changed in some small way, so it could still be a dangerous thing." Kirk's sigh was more contented, though. "You were right, there is more than one way to open a door. If we can't find the key, we'll just have to be careful and wait to be rescued. Goodnight, Spock."

Spock lay quietly listening to his friend's settling-into-sleep sounds. He could not tell him that if the time lines were as they had experienced before, they could be here a very long time before they were ever missed back in the future. They could even be here a lifetime. Spock knew that Kirk would figure that out for himself all too soon. They could be here for as long as they lived.



Kirk slept soundly until the first rays of sunlight crept silently into the wagon. He was awakened by the sound of someone moving through the room and opened his eyes in time to see D'Arcy Bordeaux slip through the door. Mildly wondering where the young man could be going so early in the morning, Kirk drifted back to a light sleep for one more hour. When he awoke a second time, bright sunlight filled the room, but gaily printed curtains had been pulled across the windows to defuse the glare. Little clinking sounds proved to be Annette Bordeaux carefully attempting to prepare breakfast without disturbing the sleepers. On the couch, McCoy was still giving his best imitation of a corpse, but Spock was no longer on the floor. The Vulcan was up and sitting at the round table methodically extracting juice from a bowl of oranges into a glass pitcher. He seemed intent upon his task of removing the seeds from a little metal squeezer.

Kirk rubbed his eyes and sat up as Spock looked in his direction. He didn't speak; he knew that Kirk would. He was right.

"Spock, what are you doing?" Spock was prepared for the question.


"I am attempting to alleviate the burden on Mrs. Bordeaux by assisting her in the preparation of the pre-noon partaking of nourishment."

Annette Bordeaux laughed, but Kirk refused to react, having been the intended foible of Spock's pre-planned one-liner. He shook his head and stood up, his voice as dead-pan as Spock's.

"I see. Well, carry on."

René came out the of the bedroom, calling to his children. "C'mon let's move it. Practice in one hour." He moved to kiss his wife, nodded to Kirk and gave a long look at Spock diligently performing his task. Apparently, he decided not to comment.





McCoy was stirring, Tristan and Desi came through the curtained entrance as the front door to the wagon opened and D'Arcy came inside. He walked over to kiss his mother, threw a glance toward his brother and sister and finally faced the waiting gaze of his father.

"I went over to check out the rigging. It's all set up for practice."

René nodded. "Then sit down and eat your breakfast," was all he said.

The young man was totally different from the day before. He looked sheepishly at Spock, seemed to want to apologize, but thought better of bringing up bad memories, so he turned to Kirk.

"You three staying with the show?"

"Actually, no," Kirk told him. "We were just visiting yesterday and lost something. We thought it might be here but it wasn't, so your parents kindly let us spend the night so we could check at the Lost and Found this morning.

"Oh, well if you lost it here at the circus, it'll turn up," D'Arcy was clearly not interested in the visitors' dilemma. He turned to his father. "I'd like to go for the triple this morning at practice. I think I've got that last bit of timing worked out."

René shook his head. "Not this morning, not yet."

"But, Papa, I'm ready."

"I will tell you when you're ready. You think you have the timing worked out. In the triple you cannot think, you must be sure."

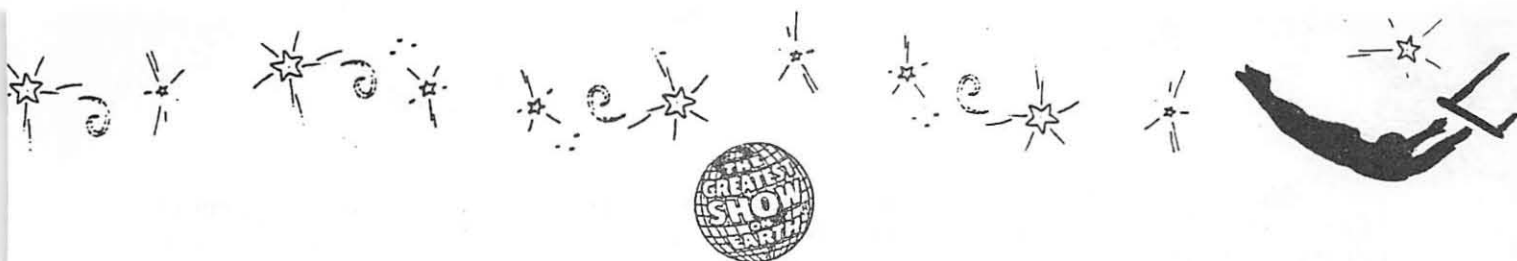
D'Arcy stared at the plate of eggs Mama had put in front of him then back at his father. His eyes glistened with controlled anger.

"Why do you have to twist everything I say? I know I can do it. It's only in practice, not part of the act."

"Only in practice?" René's voice was gentle. "You can break your back in practice as easily as in the act. Give it more time, son. It will be soon."

"You've been saying that for months," D'Arcy mumbled the words as he picked up his fork and began eating with a resignation that indicated he knew the futility of further argument.





It was Annette Bordeaux who escorted Kirk, Spock and McCoy to the Lost and Found while the others went to the Big Top for their morning practice. The man in charge checked the items that had been turned in, but the coin was not among them. Annette looked sorrowfully at her three new friends.

"I don't know what to tell you, but I must get over to practice. If you need any... help or anything, please come and ask. I can imagine it is not pleasant to be alone in a strange town. When Rene and I came from Europe to join the circus -- the children were small -- we arrived in New York City, but the circus was not there for two days. It was very frightening. Then the circus arrived, and it was like our family had come and we weren't alone anymore."

Kirk put his arm around the kind woman and gave her a squeeze. "Thank you, Annette. We'll... see what we can do."

When she was gone, they headed over to the supply tent and for the next two hours they poked, prodded and investigated every square inch of the tent. The exit through which Penguin had disappeared was nowhere. The tent was all canvas sewn at the seams, and outside was only circus, not a room in Time Place.

Kirk sat on an overturned elephant tub and looked around. "This is not the way home, gentlemen, not without the coin." Spock and McCoy had to agree. "However we find a way back, I think it's going to take some time and we do have a more immediate problem."

"Such as, Jim?" McCoy came over and sat next to him.

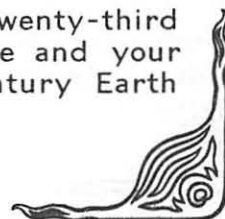
"Money. If we have to stay here for a while, we have to eat, have a place to sleep. We can't keep depending on the Bordeaux. All of those nice luxuries, in this century, Doctor, cost cold, hard cash and our remains of the currency from Time Place is depressingly low."

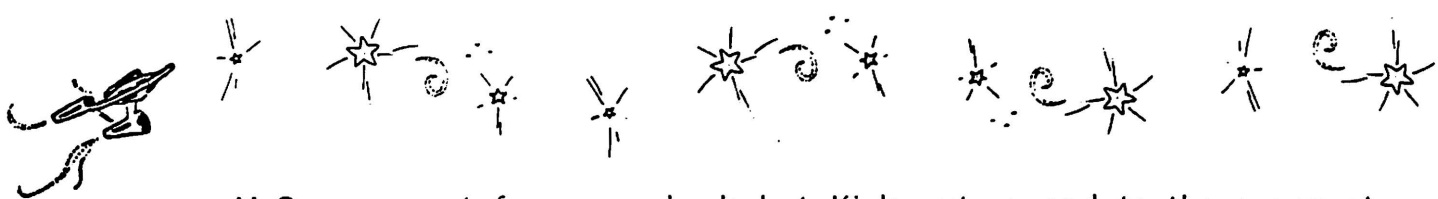
"I see your point." McCoy humpphed for a few minutes then broke into a broad grin. "I know. Remember that tent we saw yesterday with all the freaks? We'll get Spock a job there -- he'd be a natural!"

Spock looked over from his continuing examination of the tent wall. "Indeed. While I do not consider "freak" the applicable nomenclature, if I understand it correctly, I do admit that my "differences" are much more in step with this lifestyle than yours, Doctor."

"Now, just what do you mean by that, you pompous... "

"I meant, sir, that I hardly find your twenty-third century... knowledge -- for lack of a better word -- of medicine and your dark ages attitude of tolerance congruent with a twentieth century Earth "circus."





McCoy was set for a comeback but Kirk put an end to the argument. "Enough! I'm sure we have no intention of trying to display Spock as an oddity, but jobs with the circus might not be a bad idea."

"Sure," McCoy's mood was sour since he hadn't been able to have the last word with Spock. "What do you propose we do? Somehow, I can't see myself dressed up in spangled tights or baggy pants."

"Not as performers," Kirk's tone was less than patient. "But there are always plenty of jobs available at the circus. Every kid dreams about getting one. I'll go see Rene and ask him if he can help us to get hired on. You two continue to look around here till I get back."

McCoy looked after him as he left. "Every kid dreams of it, huh? And the kid in Jim Kirk just found a way to make his come true."

Kirk found the Bordeaux still at practice in the Big Top. Even in their work tights and without the music and lights, they were magnificent. More so, Kirk realized, because underneath all the glitter and fanfare, he could see the true physical ability of these athletes. Mesmerized, the purpose for his coming temporarily forgotten, he watched as D'Arcy swung out off the perch. The young man's muscled arms glistened in the heat of the tent, but his hands were dry, having been powdered by the resin bag just before he gripped the bar. René, in position in the catch trap, called a command and D'Arcy let go, going into a perfect backward flip, somersaulting twice before his hands made perfect contact with his father's. They swung for a few seconds, then let go and D'Arcy dropped into the net, rolling into a ball before he impacted. René pulled himself into a setting position, calling out as he reached for the rope to make his descent.

"That's all for the day. Go take your showers." D'Arcy was already on the ground, throwing a towel around his neck and stepping into his mules. René yelled to him. "D'Arcy, don't leave just yet. I want to speak with you."

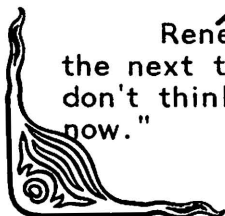
The young man seemed not to hear and started out, brushing past where Kirk was standing. Kirk reached for his arm. "D'Arcy, your father called to you. He wants you to wait."

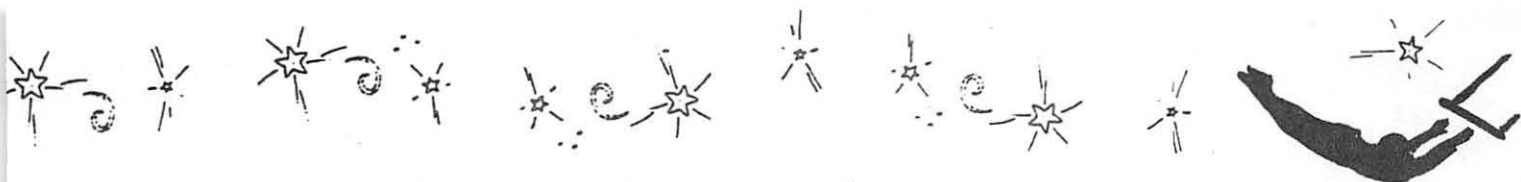
D'Arcy looked surprised to see him. "I heard him. He only wants to tell me what I did wrong. Why should I wait to hear that?" He shrugged out of Kirk's grip and ran toward the exit.

René came up, looking after his son. "I wanted him to wait; that last trick, he should have swung up higher..."

Kirk sighed. "I don't think it would have been a good idea to tell him that right now."

René seemed to notice Kirk. "But it would help him to know that, so the next time..." He stopped, sighing. "Perhaps you're right, I sometimes don't think. Well, what is it, my friend? I thought you would be gone by now."





Kirk shook his head. "Actually, René, we have a little problem. You see, none of us had very much cash on us and we were here in town planning to sell that valuable coin which we lost."

"Ah, you need a loan." Rene was willing.

"Well, uh, no." Kirk waved him off. "Rather, I was wondering if you could help us get jobs on the circus. Just so we could earn enough to... uh, get back home."

René laughed. "So you want to work for the circus. Well, it's hard work but you all three look able. Sure, sure. I'll take you over to see the bossman. He fix you up. You go get your friends while I change, then we go."



Tuffy Genders lived up to his name. He was tough but sincere and Kirk liked the broad, honest smile he gave them.

"We can't pay much, but room and board goes along with the jobs. Three meals a day in the cook-top and a berth in the single men's car." He was delighted to learn that McCoy was a doctor and immediately assigned him to the infirmary. When Spock indicated a talent for figures, Tuffy put him on payroll and receipts, apologizing that for security reasons, he'd find that wagon rather humid and stuffy, with no window. Spock assured him that he wouldn't mind.

Tuffy took a long look at Kirk, noting the well developed muscles under the cotton shirt and pants.

"Shame we can't put you on as a performer. You look like you've kept in good shape."

Kirk nodded. "I work out at a gym."

"Well, suppose we use those muscles on the rigging crew. It's not glamorous, but it's important. Everything depends on everything being set up right and kept that way. Faulty rigging anywhere on the lot can cause a serious accident. The circus has to run like a machine -- one weak link and the whole chain can go. If you know what I mean."

"I am familiar with that kind of operation," Kirk told him. "Rigging sounds fine to me."

"Good." Tuffy shook their hands. "Take the rest of the day off and report for work in the morning. Welcome aboard."







He didn't know how apt that phrase was.

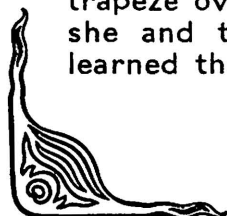


They began to establish what was almost a routine. Each of them had their specific assigned duties with ample free time to pursue individual interests. The circus had moved so many times in the past few weeks, that they lost count. Each town began to look the same as they arrived early, set up the tents, wagons, displays, equipment, and animal cages that would transform an empty lot into a dazzling wonderland. In the black of the night they would tear down and load on the trains the massive machinery which made the circus a living, breathing entity. Then they would steal away, leaving behind a once-more desolate lot and speed through the post midnight hours to the next town where, as dawn came, the procedure would begin all over again.

The circus moved with incredible speed and precision, in a seemingly effortless routine which was finely tuned to the tiniest microsecond. Kirk was awed and thought more than once how he wished his crew could watch how efficiently so much could be accomplished in so little time under such primitive, computerless conditions. Even the Enterprise could take a lesson from the kind of teamwork which was necessary to succeed as these men and women did day after day. They traveled in two sections of private trains and did mostly one night stands -- two shows a day. In the bigger towns they would stay for two or three days, and since there were no performances on Sunday, they could always look forward to at least one day layover a week.

During any free time, Spock sought a way to return to their century. Since it seemed likely that the coin was lost for good, he needed to pursue other avenues of departure and he was reasonably certain that in time he would be successful. Time travel was not as difficult a concept as was thought, however; it was not an exact science and the problem lie in estimating the correct passage lines. If Spock could re-create a parallel congruent with the speed of the 23rd century, he could conceivably extract an opening -- a doorway of sorts -- where the lines crossed. And they might be able to go home again. Unfortunately, the situation was full of ifs, maybes and possibles.

Since the timesolving problem was basically Spock's, Kirk found himself, in his free time, being drawn to watching the flyers. He tried to arrange his duties so that he would be free during the Bordeaux's practice, which was between ten a.m. and noon each day. He helped Tristan check the rigging each morning and soon was learning the purpose for each lead wire, each piece of rope, each pulley and clamp. Tristan and D'Arcy also worked a double trap act -- one in which they did not fly but did stunts from a single trapeze over ring one. Desi worked with a spec called 'a web act' in which she and thirty other girls did an aerial ballet on suspended ropes. Kirk learned the importance of all this equipment as well.





The most magical time for him, however, was when the whole family was aloft, their skill and beauty unequaled in any other act. He felt a mingling of awe and respect for these earth-bound people that almost rivaled his fascination with the stars and he fantasized that if he had been born three centuries earlier, he might very well have sought this kind of career.

It was morning -- a Tuesday -- and the Bordeaux had been arriving for practice. Tristan and Kirk had checked the equipment and even D'Arcy in one of his rare good moods had come in to help and tease playfully. He watched as Kirk tightened the last connection.

"You learn fast, Jim. I think I'll talk to Papa about hiring you permanently. Then I won't have to check the rigging each morning."

"If Papa hires him, we'll teach him to speak French and put him up in the air," Tristan added to his brother's idea.

"Now that would be something," Kirk teased back. "I could learn to do the flying and you could do the rigging."

"Oh, no," Tristan said. "A flyer must do both." He took a long look at Kirk. Kirk had removed his shirt in the early morning heat. "You have good arms, good shoulders, slim hips. I could teach you to fly."

Kirk laughed. "In how long? We're going to be leaving soon."

"Oh, not as long as you think."

Kirk realized the young man was only half teasing, "I thought you had to start learning as a child."

"Well," D'Arcy considered, "the younger the better, but it's not impossible to learn when you're older, if you're in good condition. Nothing spectacular, but a few simple tricks. Are you game?"

Kirk nodded, "You're serious."

"I'll talk to Papa about it." Tristan agreed. "I don't think there will be a problem. You can go up with us tomorrow during practice and we'll see how it goes."

Kirk looked up to the perch thirty feet overhead, eyes shining in anticipation.

"Fine, thanks. You talk to your father and I'll be here on time."

Tristan slapped his brother's rear. "C'mon D'Arcy, let's fly."





For the next two weeks, Kirk trained daily with the flamboyant Bordeaux family. They taught him to balance on the bar, to swing, to drop safely into the net -- no small accomplishment in itself. A bad fall could result in serious injury. Even as cautious as he was, by the end of the two weeks, Kirk was a mass of superficial bruises and scrapes. He was taught how to use the resin bag to keep his hands dry, how to towel off the sweat immediately upon descending to prevent a chill. They practiced, and Kirk worked harder than he ever did in the Enterprise's gym, but he loved every moment of it. It was risky and exciting and he reveled in the comraderie of inter-dependence.

He also began to know the personalities of each member of the family. Tristan was calm and steady, a methodical, soft-spoken young man. Desirée was quick, sparkling, her tinkling laughter always a pleasant underscore. Their parents, Annette and René, were simple, old-world stock with Rene definitely the ruling patriarch. The older man was emotional, loud and kind. Kirk felt close to them all.

Then there was D'Arcy. The troublesome, younger son, who often missed practice sessions, causing his family grief, was a confused and unhappy artist. Sometimes he was pleasant, fun, in harmony with his family. Other times he was mean, sullen and withdrawn.

Today, Spock was off in menagerie, helping Charlie with the horses, and McCoy was on duty in the First Aid car. By mid-morning, Kirk was finished with his chores and strolled over to the flying rig.

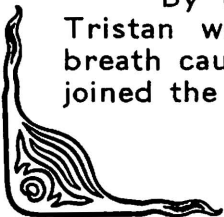
René, Tristan and Desi were already aloft. Annette sat on the ring bank taping her wrist with painstaking care. Kirk sensed a cloud of depression hanging over the group. Curious, he approached, but said nothing.

"Good morning," Desi called down, waving from the perch.

Annette smiled at him, a tired, sad smile. "I washed the tights for you," she offered in her lilting English. "Go backstage and change if you wish to join us."

Kirk dipped his head respectfully. "Merci." Then, unable to keep the twinkle from his eyes, he winked at her and rushed off to change. It was as he worked on the faded yellow costume that it occurred to him what was wrong, what was missing. D'Arcy, again. He was absent from another rehearsal. Talent or not, the boy couldn't miss too many practice sessions and stay in top form. Rene must be furious.

By the time he got back to the ring, Annette was on the perch and Tristan was executing a flawless double somersault to his father. Kirk's breath caught in his throat with excitement as he climbed the side ladder and joined the women.





He waited silently, assisting, until finally René nodded to him. "Swing out, Jaimé." Next to Kirk, Tristan smiled encouragement, holding the bar for him.

"Don't let go -- just take it easy."

It was simple, a basic exercise, yet Kirk thrilled, swinging back and forth, thirty feet up. After a few minutes of that, he was joined on the bar by Tristan, who hung beside him.

"Now -- when I tell you, 'go', let go of the bar and take Papa's hands. It'll only be a couple of inches -- just don't panic."

"No -- I won't," Kirk assured, his heart hammering. This was further than he'd ever gone, and yet he wasn't afraid. He trusted the family implicitly. If he wasn't ready, they wouldn't expect it of him.

"If you miss, curl into a ball like you were taught," Tristan went on, his voice low, calm next to Kirk's ear. As Kirk nodded, he asked, "Ready?" A pause. "One... Two... Three... Go!"

There was a moment of suspension, of weightlessness, not unknown to someone who had done freefalls in Zero G, yet different from that in the degree of freedom it implied. Then his wrists were being clamped tight, he felt a tug on his shoulder muscles, and he was hanging, swinging back and forth with René Bordeaux. Delighted, he grinned at the distorted world around him.

The rest of the family were clapping softly. For a fleeting moment, he wondered how he was going to get back. "A pirouette," he heard Rene saying. "When I say 'go', let go and turn around, like you did on the trampoline the other day. The bar will be there. Grab it and hold tight." Rene did not wait for an acknowledgement. They swung together then... "GO". Kirk felt his hands let go, remembered to twist his body, reach out. His hands made contact with a trapeze. As he swung upward, he reached the perch and Tristan was there to pull him in. He stood solidly on the board, they all applauded exuberantly, and Kirk knew he had made his first cross over and back. He had actually flown!

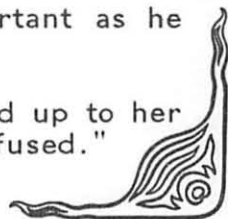
Later, as they all climbed down, Kirk remembered his concern over D'Arcy. His own personal experience had been so fulfilling, so exciting, he had almost forgotten the family's trouble.

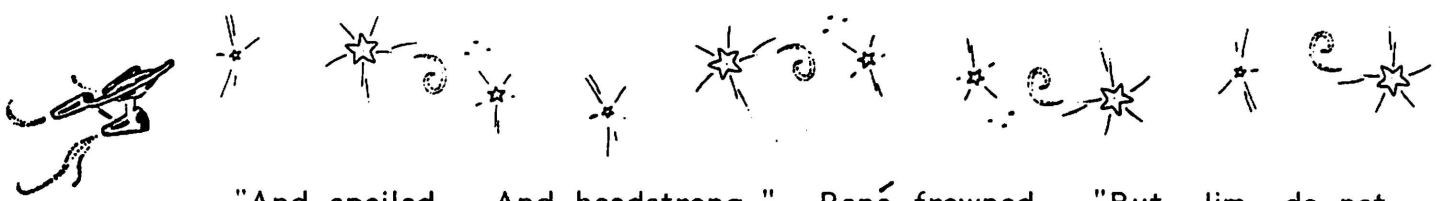
Desi draped a towel over his shoulders. "You do well, Jim. Congratulations."

"Yes -- the Bordeaux make a flyer out of you," René's promise was a boast.

Tristan scowled. "Maybe D'Arcy will see he's not as important as he thinks -- as indispensable."

"Stop -- Arrête!" Annette's voice was hard as she stepped up to her oldest son. "We don't need your rebellion, too. D'Arcy is... confused."





"And spoiled. And headstrong." René frowned. "But, Jim, do not think we train you to replace D'Arcy, or to make him jealous. Please, we're not that small."

"I know." Kirk squeezed the man's shoulder in reassurance. "I'm just grateful you're giving me a chance to fulfill a fantasy of mine." From the corner of his eye, he saw the tall dark figure of Spock approaching. He turned eagerly, anticipating the sharing of his accomplishments.

Spock's Vulcan features had never been more sober. His expression was not directed at Kirk, however, but at the Bordeaux. Stepping up directly to René, he clasped his hands behind his back.

"Sir, I have come from the front office. There is a message for you, an emergency. Please go at once."

The older man blanched. "What is it? D'Arcy?"

"There has been an accident. That's all I know." As Spock explained, Tristan began running ahead. Shaken, the rest of the family followed quickly.

Kirk almost went after them, but he checked his impetuosity and turned, instead, to Spock, a question in his eyes.

The Vulcan shook his head. "D'Arcy was involved in a vehicular accident. He's at the local Emergency Room being treated for relatively minor injuries, as I understood it."

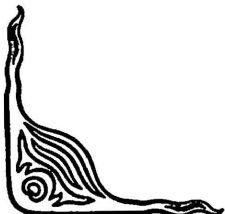
"Poor kid. Just what he needs. Just what they all need."

Spock seemed to notice Kirk's attire for the first time, as if the significance of it finally penetrated. "I see you were working out with the Bordeaux again." There was a faint trace of concern in the words. Kirk chose to ignore it.

"I was flying -- actually flying, Spock. It's fantastic!" Kirk laughed at the slight scowl and tossed his towel at the Vulcan. "Don't be such a worrier. The magic and the reality are miles apart. It's training and hard work, that's all."

"One must assume that you know what you are doing, Captain. I did not mean to pass judgment on your activities."

Kirk wasn't sure if that was an apology or not but he decided not to press the issue. Instead, he changed the subject. "Let's go find McCoy and tell him about D'Arcy's accident."





It was McCoy and Spock who rode into town with one of the roustabouts to pick up D'Arcy at the hospital. The family had the matinee to perform, and in the circus, nothing prevents the show from going on. And, to Kirk's surprise and delight, René asked Kirk if he would "fill in" for D'Arcy -- that meant, specifically, go up, look important, do a simple swing or two to fill out the act. Kirk cheerfully bade his friends farewell and hurried to the Bordeaux's trailer.

Annette bore the news of D'Arcy with a stoicism that would have been approved by a Vulcan. René had obviously been weeping, his face showed its ravages, but he had pulled himself together fairly well to prepare for the performance. Kirk's heart went out to the old-world couple, who seemed to struggle so nobly against their troubles. He wanted to be able to say or do something to help, but he did not know what.

Tristan poured them each a cup of coffee and they drank silently. Finally, Papa sighed and put down his mug.

"I'd better give the rig a final check."

"I just did it," Tristan assured him. "You rest, Papa." He turned to Kirk. "We'll start dressing in about 20 minutes. Are you nervous?"

"A little," Kirk confessed. "I think mostly of the audience."

Desi laughed. "Of course. Sometimes I pretend they are not there."

René shook his head. "No, child, never forget them. They are the raison for it all. Without them, you would be merely an acrobat." He looked at Kirk. "It is the thrill of the performance, of the exhibition we stage, that makes the difference in quality. Much that we do is done for effect."

"Like taking me up, to fill out an empty space?" Kirk was beginning to understand, he thought.

"Precisely. Most of the audience won't know the difference."

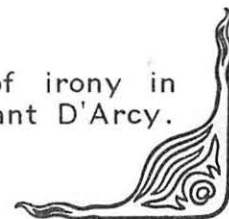
A costume was brought to him -- too large to be D'Arcy's; Kirk wondered where it had come from. The unspoken question was answered by Annette.

"You're almost the same size as René's brother. He was over here with us last summer, helping out in the act when Tristan was ill."

"He's a flyer back in France," Desi explained.

Kirk grinned. "Your whole family really is circus, then."

"That is usually the way it is." There was a twist of irony in Tristan's words, and Kirk knew he was thinking of the recalcitrant D'Arcy. Papa clapped his hands brusquely. "Come -- let's get ready."







The primitive hospital was a wonder to McCoy. He wished he had more time to study the surroundings and yet, he knew he'd ultimately be appalled and disgusted. Actually, it wasn't as bad as he had anticipated. History not being one of his strongest subjects, he hadn't been sure how far along medicine had been in the 1940's. At least everything was sterile and sepsis was observed.

With a lot of bluff and bluster, McCoy told the staff that he was the circus physician, and as such, they took him aside and explained D'Arcy's case, and showed him the x-rays. McCoy frowned, but kept quiet as they outlined the treatment he had received.

His most severe injury was his left arm. The radius had sustained a compound fracture. It had been set in a heavy, plaster of paris cast. The hospital staff was concerned, because of D'Arcy's profession, whether or not he would recover 100% use of the arm. If he was impaired, even slightly, he would never fly again.

In a few minutes, Sam, the roustabout, came in with D'Arcy. The young man looked totally disheveled. There was a bandage over his eye, the left arm encased in cast and sling. His clothes were wrinkled and dirty. He needed a bath and a shave. He smelled of whiskey, confirming the report that he'd been driving drunk when the accident occurred.

He looked over at McCoy with resignation in his eyes, but said nothing. Sam approached.

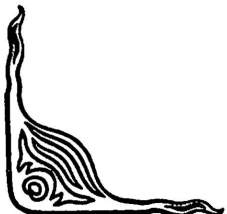
"That feller Spock went to git the car, Doc. You just about ready?"

McCoy nodded, took the record folder from the physician and started to walk out before Sam's words sank in. Spock... went to get the... car? Oh, Lordy! He virtually ran toward the hospital entrance, dread consuming him.

The old brown sedan was waiting at the driveway, its engine humming contentedly, the driver reclining casually. McCoy clamped his mouth shut, determined not to give the Vulcan the satisfaction of acknowledging his accomplishment. Smug, egotistical bastard, McCoy thought with affection.

Sam and D'Arcy emerged from the building, and McCoy smirked as Sam ousted Spock to take the driver's seat himself. Looking a bit piqued, Spock slid across the front. McCoy and D'Arcy climbed in the back.

Still the young D'Arcy had said nothing. McCoy could tell he was in pain from the pinched look around his lips and eyes, but he did not complain of it. Finally, McCoy opened the subject of his injuries.





"Did they give you any medication for pain at the hospital?"

"No. "M all right. It's just a broken arm."

McCoy scowled at the boy's naivete. "It's not just a broken arm, son. The fracture is severe and if it doesn't heal properly, there could be permanent impairment."

D'Arcy's interest seemed to pick up at last. "Did the doctor back there tell you that?"

"He's concerned, yes. But aside from his opinion, I saw your x-rays myself, and I think you're going to need some special treatments."

D'Arcy put his head back against the seat and swallowed hard. "I... I don't want to have a crippled arm." A note of fear crept into his voice.

"Then trust me," McCoy insisted. "I know the... latest techniques. I can help you."

Spock twisted in his seat and flashed a question at McCoy with his eyes, but when the doctor did not respond, he did not pursue the inquiry.

Mollified, D'Arcy nodded and took a deep breath. They rode silently for a few minutes and as time stretched out, D'Arcy grew restless. Absently, he fished in his trouser pocket, extracted a coin, and began doing finger tricks with it in his good hand. McCoy was paying only scant attention, noticing the activity from the corner of his eye, then all at once he sat forward.

"Let me see that coin. Where did you get it?"

The urgency in his voice caused Spock to turn, also. D'Arcy looked confused.

"What, this? It's just some kind of souvenir, I think. I found it in our trailer, on the floor. Why?" He handed it over to McCoy.


"Oh, Lord, look here Spock." McCoy's face broke into a grin and even the Vulcan's expression lightened. It was, indeed, their missing "key," their transportation back to their time and place.

"This is ours," Spock told D'Arcy. Then he patiently explained how they had lost it, and how that was why they had been staying with the show.

D'Arcy focused on the immediate. "Does that mean that you'll leave now?" He looked at McCoy. "You promised to help me..." There was a childlike implication of trust. McCoy hesitated.

"Well... I'm not too sure what our plans will be. We'll have to discuss it with our... friend."





Spock looked at McCoy, raising one eyebrow in curiosity. McCoy met his eyes and shrugged with a forced casualness. With a heavy sigh, Spock slipped the coin into his shirt pocket.

"Perhaps I'd better look after this, for now."

McCoy grinned. "Wait'll Jim hears. He'll be delighted."

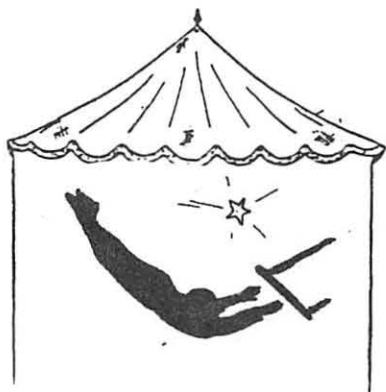


"... And over center ring, the Flying Bordeaux!"

Kirk carefully matched his movements to the rest of the troupe, removing his cape with a twirl and a flourish, stepping out of the awkwardly high mules, heading for the rigging with a bounce in his walk. The applause filled his ears, drowning out even the blare of the circus orchestra. The colors, the lights, were dazzling, rainbow prisms shooting everywhere. The heady pungent odor of the circus -- a mingling of popcorn, elephants, greasepaint and hay -- was beginning to smell familiar, to give a sense of security and comfort.

Even before this dazzling moment as he climbed the side ladder behind Tristan, Kirk had been treated to a wondrous opportunity. He had paraded around the Hippodrome track with the troupe at the opening of the show, experiencing for the first time the excitement of the audience. Papa was right -- it was wrong to ignore them, Kirk decided, as he strutted through his paces.

Then, later, he had come out for the Spec, the big production at the end of act one. All the performers participated, taking various parts. Filling in for D'Arcy, Kirk had to wear a toga, and sit in a chariot that was pulled by four white arabian stallions. There were floats, vehicles of all kinds, horses, elephants, dogs, giraffes and an ape, all costumed and bedecked in glorious displays of color, glitter and tinsel. Kirk had watched it a number of times now, as an observer, yet it was a whole new experience to participate.



After spec, he had changed back into his aerialist costume and waited in the wings with the family until their act was announced. Before they stepped out into the spotlight, René performed a little ritual of taking each of them by hand, clasping, squeezing, then stepping away. Today, he included Kirk naturally, easily, as if he had always been a part of them.

Now, up on the perch, waiting for the signal to fly out, the magic had taken a back seat to effort and concentration. Even the simple skills that he had mastered were precise acrobatic feats. Every move was timed, choreographed. A mistake in timing or judgment could be fatal -- to himself



or to another member of the group. And so, the audience faded, the lights were mere illumination, the music was a faint backdrop to the spoken commands of René and Annette and occasionally Tristan.

Kirk was proud of his ability to concentrate, proud of his athletic skill and the feel of muscles working in synchronized harmony. He became a part of the rhythm of the act, and it was beautiful.

Finally, yet all too soon it seemed, René gave the signal for them to prepare to drop into the net. With careful precision, Kirk somersaulted in mid-air, landed in a ball then flipped himself out and onto the ground and stood, arms upraised, as the crowd cheered.



Spock and McCoy had entered the big top just as the flyers were ascending for their act. They had rushed over, hoping to catch Kirk before he went on, to tell him their news. McCoy was chagrined that they had missed by scant moments. Spock was more than slightly annoyed; he had hoped that upon seeing the coin, Kirk would give up this foolish notion of flying, and decide to return immediately.

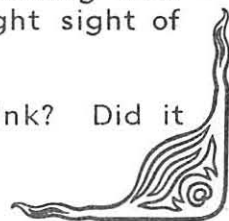
With the joyful surprise delayed, the two Enterprise officers stood in the wings and watched their captain swing, leap and pirouette thirty feet straight up. McCoy's concern encompassed all the many things that could be done to the human body by a fall of that distance.

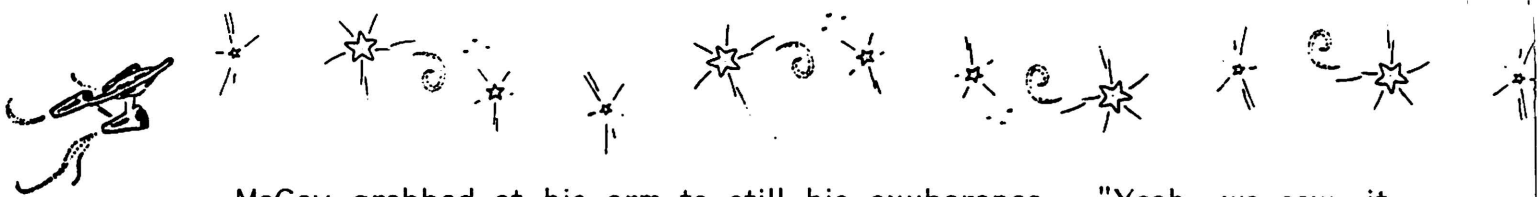
Spock's thoughts traveled the same path, yet he saw a grace and an elegance in Kirk's performance that stunned him with its beauty. He was entranced by the magic, awed by the fact that Kirk was a part of it, pleased by and for his Captain's accomplishment. He understood, at last, that it was not a foolish whim, understood what it was which so attracted Kirk. Although Spock was uneasy with the risks Kirk was taking, he respected his right to take them, and he could applaud for him as loud as anyone there.

McCoy grinned as Kirk executed a perfect drop and ran to the ring bank to take his bow. To the doctor, Kirk's fascination with the trapeze act made absolute psychological sense. It was tailor-made for command-profile types. It was strenuous, difficult, yet in a completely physical way. Kirk could never sit idle for long, but his activity had to be channeled into a different direction, away from ship and responsibility, away from competition and other stress-related areas. It was also the idea of being part of a team, not the one on the lofty pinnacle of command, not the one giving the orders, shouldering the heavy burden of making every decision. This was work, but it was fun. Yes, McCoy decided, Kirk's actions were perfectly predictable.

The troupe ran for the exit. Kirk, his face and hair glistening with sweat, a towel over his shoulders, cape thrown over one arm, caught sight of them and beamed broadly.

"Spock.... Bones -- did you see the act? What did you think? Did it go all right?"





McCoy grabbed at his arm to still his exuberance. "Yeah, we saw, it was fine, Jim, but..."

Interrupting, Kirk turned to Spock, an expectant look on his face. "Well? How about it, Spock. Didn't think I could do it, did you?"

Tempted to smile, the Vulcan's eyes betrayed his delight. "Your performance was flawless. You are an excellent aerialist, Jim. I was completely absorbed."

Such words of praise from Spock were astounding. Kirk understood the empathy his friend was exhibiting and was touched by it.

"Thank you."

McCoy was still bent on sharing their news about the coin. "Now, listen, Jim. Spock and I..."

"Not now, Bones. I'm starved and hot and thirsty. The Bordeaux always eat after a performance. Do you mind if I join them? You two come along -- there's always plenty."

"Jim, we found the coin!" McCoy blurted.

"That's good, Bones. But we can discuss it later. Hey, did you see the way I swung over to the perch on the last trick? I..."

McCoy and Spock exchanged a bewildered look as he rambled on. Obviously, Kirk had not heard a word. Spock raised an eyebrow.

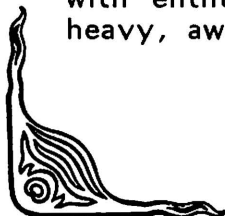
"Perhaps later, Doctor, after he has... settled down?"

Kirk had gone ahead of them. McCoy stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets, one of the better luxuries of 1940 clothing, and humpphed loudly. "Damn fool obsessive behavior..."



When they arrived at the trailer, they found D'Arcy waiting for them. He had washed, shaved and changed clothes for a more presentable appearance. He had even finished dinner preparations and set the table.

The family fussed over him, full of sympathy and concern. Talk at the table centered around his injuries. McCoy was consulted, and they listened as he outlined what he wanted to do. As the doctor explained, in simple terms, the reasons behind every step of his treatment, the family concurred with enthusiasm. D'Arcy was pleased at the prospect of relinquishing the heavy, awkward cast.





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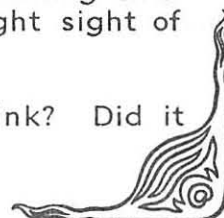
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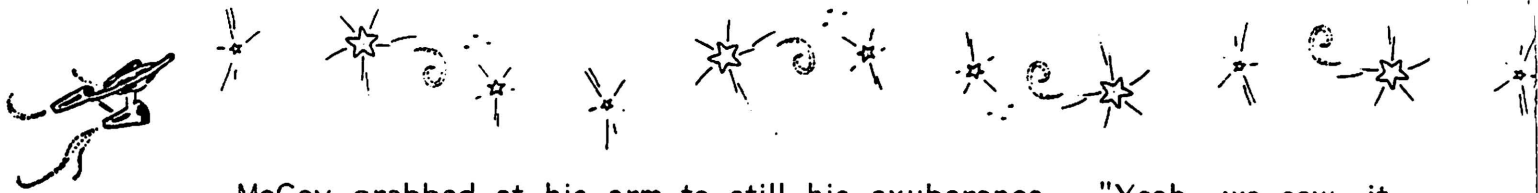
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Kirk listened in silence, considering all that McCoy was saying. Like the Vulcan earlier, he wondered if the doctor was going a bit too far in extending a helping hand. His specialized skill was a product of a 23rd century education, using knowledge and techniques which had been developed over a 3-century span from now.

After coffee, the three friends found themselves strolling away from the trailer, headed in the general direction of the pay wagon, where Spock had to report for work soon. Before Kirk had a chance to voice what was on his mind, Spock halted, turned to him and carefully extracted something from his pocket.

"I believe you shall find this of interest, Captain."

Kirk took the coin from the Vulcan's fingers, a smile creasing his face. "Spock! When... where...?"

McCoy crossed his arms over his chest. "We tried to tell you earlier, Jim, but you weren't payin' any attention."

"After the act..." Kirk focused on a vague impression. There had been something McCoy tried to tell him. "After the act..." he repeated. "Oh, no. I've got to perform this evening." Suddenly the thought of returning, now that the urgency was removed, seemed less vital. He brightened. "Well, we can leave tomorrow. We've stayed this long."

McCoy looked at the ground. "Uh, Jim, that's what I wanted to talk about."

"Yes, Doctor?"

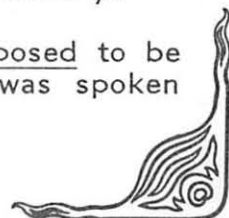
"I promised D'Arcy and the Bordeaux that I'd help him. What I didn't tell them is that unless I help, that man's going to be permanently disabled. The bone's pressing on the radial nerve, and if it heals like that, it will result in a 30-50% disability. He'll never fly again, Jim."

Kirk considered. "What are you saying, Bones? You want to remain here to treat him?"

Spock interceded. "Captain -- Doctor -- may I point out here that what we're contemplating may be extremely dangerous. We are meddling in the past, using our century's skills to affect changes in this one's. It is precisely the peril we discussed upon our arrival."

McCoy stood firm. "Nonsense, Spock. I'm a physician and as such, it's my duty to relieve suffering, to heal to the best of my ability, wherever I find it. I'm not usin' any 23rd century technology to accomplish that. Just plain ol' Human intelligence. Besides, the method of treatment I'm using on D'Arcy will be available within his lifetime. It's not that revolutionary."

"No, Bones, but if you weren't here -- and you're not supposed to be -- then D'Arcy wouldn't have that option." Kirk's argument was spoken pensively.





McCoy met his eyes. "Would you condemn him to a lifetime on the ground?"

Kirk was thoughtful. "Spock, can you be positive that this would constitute interference?"

"I cannot be positive, Jim. Like all our hypotheses here, the repercussions of time travel are speculative only. But dare we take the risk?"

"Bones, how long? Minimum time you need."

McCoy thought about it. "Three weeks should do. He's young, he'll heal fast."

Kirk weighed all the data, knowing that the wrong decision could be disastrous. Yet everything Human in him agreed with McCoy -- if they had the ability to help, they must use it. Their ship, their life, must wait, as if the coin had not been found. Kirk closed his fist around the golden circle.

"Okay, Bones. Three weeks. We owe the Bordeaux that much." He looked at Spock. "Agreed, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded slowly. "Affirmative, Jim."



McCoy carefully wrapped D'Arcy's arm with a clean bandage, and re-affixed the metal frame he had constructed. Spock had helped him to calibrate the weights and do the actual physical engineering of the impromptu therapeutic apparatus. So much for Vulcan reticence, the doctor mused.

With the minor surgery he had performed to re-align the bones, and a week of the mobile traction device to keep them in line, D'Arcy's arm was beginning to look good. Fortunately, the circus medical car had a small x-ray unit, so he was able to monitor the progress. He was also administering a drug, used in this time for a totally different reason, as a nerve regenerator, to augment the healing of the bruised radial nerve.

"Well, son, we'll have you flying real soon, now." McCoy wiped his hands on a towel.

D'Arcy shrugged. "I don't know if that's good or bad."

McCoy nodded. "I can understand that. You're kind of between a rock and a hard place, aren't you?"

"It's just... " D'Arcy hesitated, then went on. There was something about the gentle physician that made him want to talk. "I don't know anything else. There's a whole world out there, there's a war going on in





our homeland, there is a world which I don't inhabit. When you're circus, it is your life, your world.

"When I was a little boy, we came here to America. I used to see other kids my age -- townies. At first I thought -- 'they shun me because I don't speak their language.' So I studied and I learned, so that I might talk with others. And after... after, I discovered that they still wanted no part of a circus kid. Even down at Winter Quarters. Even there, circus kids are looked on as different. We have no home anywhere -- except here."

With such an alienation complex, McCoy reflected that it should be Spock in whom D'Arcy confided. Or would that be like the blind leading the blind?

"So, what are you saying? You don't want to be where you feel a sense of belonging; you want to belong where you sense distrust and hostility? New worlds to conquer, is that it?"

D'Arcy was thoughtful. "Maybe. I feel as if I should be doing something else. My family doesn't want to let me grow up. I am l'enfant -- the baby."

"Want an outsider's point of view?" At the young man's reluctant nod, McCoy went on. "I don't see that they treat you as immature. Even when you commit childish acts, they reason, they discuss. D'Arcy, I think you expect them to behave a certain way."

Just then, the door was opened and Spock climbed into the car. He nodded absently at D'Arcy, and addressed McCoy.

"Doctor, may I request you come with me to the big top. I believe you should watch this rehearsal. Jim plans to do a new stunt -- "

"What stunt?" D'Arcy asked, instantly curious.

"A forward somersault." Spock said it disdainfully.

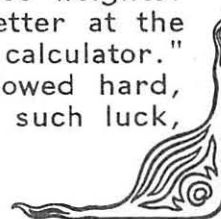
D'Arcy laughed. "Oh, Spock, that's simple. I was doing it at five years of age."

"It does not sound 'simple'." Spock looked slightly less apprehensive.

"Well, Papa would not let Jim do anything he wasn't ready to do." D'Arcy stood up. "Thanks again, Doc. See you tomorrow."

Spock watched him leave, frowning, then he turned to McCoy. "His arm is mending?"

"Very nicely. One day this week, I want you to check those weights. We may have to adjust the tension as the bone knits. You're better at the mechanics of it. Not to mention the math -- I'm lost without my calculator." Too late, McCoy realized what he had just said, and he swallowed hard, praying Spock wouldn't pick up on it. He was to be granted no such luck, however. The blasted Vulcan leaped on the accidental admission.





"You find yourself in need of a computer, Doctor? Fascinating. I thought you always claimed that such devices were not necessary to the practice of medicine."

McCoy headed for the door. "Y'know, you're right, Spock. I should be there when Jim does that stunt." He exited quickly.



Kirk and Tristan were alone in the dressing room, still changing into their plain, faded practice tights. As Kirk smoothed up the woolen fabric, he couldn't help grinning at the memory of Spock's expression of dread when told of today's lesson. He had been the picture of a perturbed Vulcan attempting to remain unperturbed. Spock did try to be tolerant of his Captain's whims, but it was difficult, Kirk admitted with chagrin.

Tristan asked him what was so funny.

"I was thinking of my friend, Spock. He's not too happy with my flying."

"He seems to care about you very much," Tristan observed. "I have noticed it. He is always there for you. It is much like the symmetry between an aerialist and his catcher."

Kirk was intrigued. "Is that how it seems to you? It's true that we're very close."

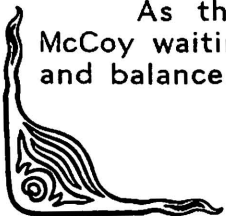
"It's more than 'close'. I speak of a... unity. Anticipation. Knowing things before they are spoken." Tristan spoke quite matter-of-factly as he pulled his costume into place. "In the act, it is the flyer who is the star, who the crowd notices. And yet, it is the catcher who is behind him, the catcher who provides the balance and the support, in many, many ways."

"Yes, I guess that's Spock, too." Kirk smiled. "He's my balance and support." He hesitated, then asked a question that had been on his mind. "Tristan, tell me -- when we first arrived, I'm sure you noticed that Spock was... different..."

Tristan intercepted him. "Yes. We see that he has some abnormalities. But, Jim, we're circus people. We're surrounded by odd people. We do not mention or take note of their differences, unless the person speaks of it himself."

"That's a tolerance I believe Spock appreciates." Kirk stood up. "Thank you."

As they entered the ring, Kirk wasn't surprised to find Spock and McCoy waiting, observing. He didn't mind; he was grateful for their support and balance.





The circus worked its way across middle America. The days grew longer and hotter. The entire adventure still seemed like a fantasy to Kirk, isolated as they were from the rest of the world by their association with the circus.

At first, they all had been fascinated by every tiny detail: the clothes, the methods of transportation, the hair styles, the customs and practices. It wasn't their first experience with time travel, but it was uncommon enough to be a novelty. Yet as the weeks passed, they adapted and became quite used to doing without the things which they had believed were vital.

As the train passed from city to city, drawing packed audiences wherever the show played, doctor met with his special patient daily. When he thought about it, McCoy considered himself something of a miracle worker, to achieve the results he was getting in this primitive culture. On the other hand, though, it pained him to see all the needless suffering around that he could do nothing to help. Many of the so-called 'freaks' were nothing more than birth defects that, in his time, would be preventable. In fact, fifty years or so from this time, they would be correctable or treatable. There was sickness, too, and ineffectual medicine that did little good. One of the clowns came down with pneumonia, and when the laudenum didn't help, he had to be hospitalized in Gary, Indiana and the show moved on without him. McCoy's hands were itching for want of a hypospray or two of cefoxitine, but he was powerless to help.

There was, of course, the fear of altering history. They had discussed it at length and come up with no comfortable solution. It was not until they reached the small town of Lebanon, Missouri, that it became clear to them exactly why Time Place continued to do what they were doing.

Set-up was finished by nine a.m., and D'Arcy dropped by to tell McCoy that he was going into town for some groceries. McCoy looked up from his microscope.

"Hey, sounds good. Mind if I go along? I have a few things I could do."

D'Arcy smiled. "Meet me at the car in 20 minutes."

Quickly, McCoy ran to inform his friends. He was surprised when Kirk opted to join him, figuring his Captain would be too busy working with the Bordeaux. Usually, Kirk was too busy rehearsing, but today he had the time and inclination to accompany McCoy. It was Spock who declined. The Vulcan had become very involved with the beautiful white liberty horses, and he had begun to train as well as groom them. Their owner said he had a natural ability with horseflesh.

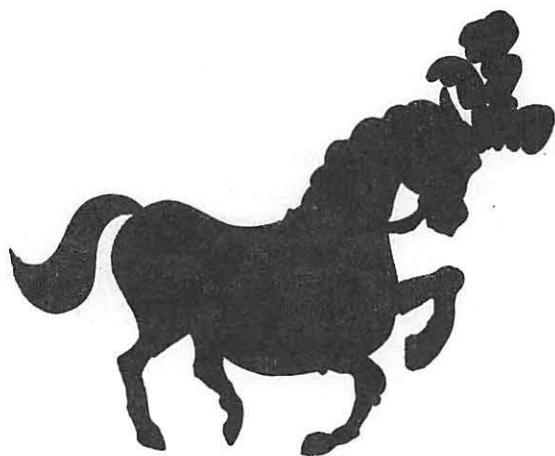
Very quickly, McCoy and Kirk were riding down the road with D'Arcy Bordeaux. The troubled young man was in a rare good mood. They stopped at a roadside filling station and D'Arcy bought them all bottles of something







called Coca-Cola, from a cold ice chest. After an experimental sip, McCoy nodded his approval at Kirk and they drank with eagerness, thirsty in the hot, dusty air. As they rode, D'Arcy began to sing lustily, simple refrains and after one or two choruses, Kirk and McCoy were joining in.



When they got to Lebanon, they found it was a small town with one main street of stores and not very busy on this weekday morning. As they drove past the windows, they noticed the posters everywhere, heralding the arrival of the circus. The advance men had done their job well, it seemed.

D'Arcy pulled up in front of a variety store. With the engine idling, he hopped out.

"I have to pick up a pair of stockings for Desiree. It will take only a moment."

Kirk climbed out of the back seat. "I'll come in with you."

McCoy, in the passenger seat, lounged against the backrest. "Well, I'll just wait here, y'all."

As D'Arcy headed for the door, a thought struck him and he turned back to McCoy. "Better pull up that emergency brake - we're on an incline."

McCoy looked blank. "The 'what'? Where is it?"

"Right by the steering wheel -- see the lever?"

Scooting into the driver's seat, McCoy stared at the various knobs and levers. There was one right on the side of the wheel.

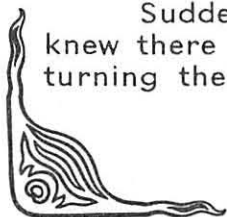
"Pull up on it," D'Arcy was saying.

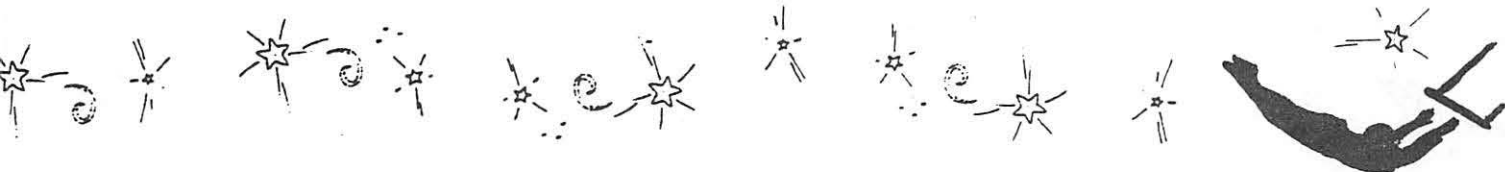
McCoy pulled up. The car gave a buck and began to roll forward.

"No!" McCoy heard D'Arcy shout. "Hit the brake! You put the car in gear!"

On an incline, the car picked up speed rapidly. McCoy tried various things in the scant seconds that passed -- he turned on the windshield wipers, blew the horn -- but the car only went faster. McCoy's heart began to pound.

Suddenly, there was a man on a bicycle crossing the road. McCoy knew there was no way to avoid him, although he tried pulling on the wheel, turning the direction of the car. There was a sickening thud, the sound of





crunching metal, then McCoy's swerve took bike and car up onto the sidewalk and against a brick wall, where they finally came to a halt.

Thrown forward and missing the windshield by inches, McCoy was shaking so badly he couldn't move. He knew what had happened -- what he had done -- to the human body on that bicycle and he was terrified to emerge and see the damage. From afar, he heard footsteps pounding toward him. Jim!

"Bones! Bones -- are you all right?" Kirk was throwing open the door, reaching in to him, fingers trembling as he touched the stunned physician. Somehow McCoy managed to nod as Kirk drew him carefully forward.

Training re-established itself; with a shudder, McCoy shook off his lethargy and made the effort to stand.

"That man... I've got to... help... "

From around the front came D'Arcy with another young man who was wiping the dust from his clothes.

"Boy, you sure gave me a fright!" the stranger laughed nervously. "Where'd you get your license, anyway?"

Amazed, McCoy could only stare numbly for a moment. "You're... all right?" he managed at last.

A small crowd had formed, curious onlookers who had seen or heard the commotion. McCoy heard them muttering among themselves -- remarks about miracles and wonders, quarrelsome grumblings about his driving and his state of intoxication. McCoy didn't care what they said, as long as the man was uninjured.

"I'm fine," the stranger assured him.

"Maybe you'd better let me check you over. I'm a doctor," McCoy told him.

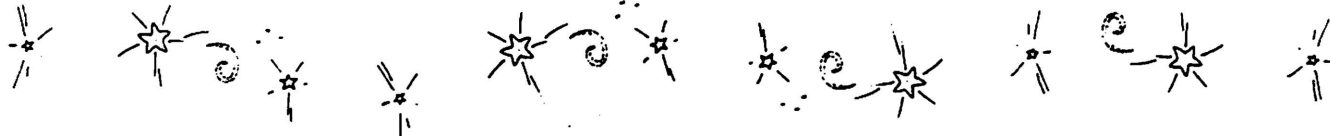
"No, really. Where's my bike?"

Someone had extracted the bicycle from under the fender of the car. It was slightly bent, but otherwise undamaged. With McCoy still nearly out of it, Kirk apologized for them and handed some money to the man to pay for his bike. D'Arcy examined the car and came back to them.

"Car's okay, and this crowd's getting antsy, so let's move it, shall we?" He looked at McCoy, who had sat in the driver's seat, but sideways, with his feet on the sidewalk. "Are you okay, Doc?" He put a hand on the physician's shoulder.

"C'mon, Bones -- move over and let D'Arcy drive," Kirk instructed. "Your taxi skills leave much to be desired." It was a feeble joke; Kirk tried to lighten the mood, but didn't succeed.





"Yeah... sure... " With a sigh, McCoy slid across the seat as Kirk climbed in behind him. The Captain leaned forward and kept a hand on his shoulder as D'Arcy drove the car back up the hill and around a corner to the grocery store. This time he parked it legally and turned off the motor.

"Look, I'm really sorry, Doc. I should've realized you didn't know how to drive. Maybe you ought to think about learning, though. For your own safety." D'Arcy's voice was gentle, concerned.

"It's not your fault." McCoy managed a smile. "I was... I was just afraid I was going to hurt someone."

"Gosh, I thought that guy on the bike was a goner." D'Arcy nodded. "Sure was weird the way he wasn't hurt a bit."

Kirk noticed a large 'TAVERN' sign just across the street. He tapped McCoy's shoulder. "C'mon, Bones, I'll buy you a drink. It looks like you need one."

D'Arcy nodded. "Good idea. I'll let you know when I've got the groceries."

Kirk led McCoy into the bar and to a booth. He ordered whiskey straight for both of them.

"It's not a Finagle's Folly, but it'll have to do. Cheers." He tipped his glass.

McCoy drank thoughtfully. Out of nowhere, he suddenly said, "D'Arcy's right, Jim. It was weird. That man should have been dead. I heard him hit the car, felt the impact..."

"Just a freak of -- "

"No," McCoy interrupted, insistent. "No, listen, Jim. I'm remembering something that Penguin said to us. When we were in Time Place, and he turned on that funny blue light..."

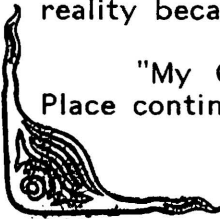
"Yes? Go on, Bones." Kirk leaned closer.

"He said something. Something like, 'This is so all will be as it is meant to be' -- something like that. I didn't pay it any mind because I thought we were just bein' hypnotized."

"It wasn't until later we realized this is real," Kirk supplied, catching on. "You mean, he... did something to us? Are you saying we can't change history?"

"I'm sayin', isn't it possible? I couldn't hurt that man today. A physical reality became unreality. Damn it, Jim, I was going forty miles an hour!"

"My God." Kirk was stunned by the implication. "No wonder Time Place continues to function. They've found a way to neutralize interference."





"Well, when we get back, let's take it to Spock -- see if he agrees." McCoy belted down the drink.

Kirk nodded and smiled at his friend, suddenly struck by a strong feeling of tenderness toward this compassionate man. Throughout the ordeal, McCoy's only thoughts had been for the hapless bicyclist -- a fact that was not lost on Kirk. What an asset to the Enterprise McCoy really was, and what an asset to him, personally.

But the emotion was only fleeting, replaced by thoughts of the quandaries of time travel and the curiosity of Time Place Ltd. A dozen questions -- all unanswered -- swirled through his brain.



Later, on the circus back lot, they presented their theory to Spock. The Vulcan nodded thoughtfully.

"It does seem a distinct possibility. I wasn't present for your 'accident', Doctor, so I... "

"Well, I told you the whole story, Spock. Damn, I'm not lyin' or exaggerating." McCoy scowled.

"I saw it as well, Spock," Kirk added. "And it seems likely that Time Place can prevent interference, I think."

McCoy was thoughtful. "One thing puzzles me."

"Only one?" Spock's eyebrow rose, his tone caustic.

"Vulcans aren't supposed to joke," the doctor admonished, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "No, seriously. What about D'Arcy's arm? Am I not changing things by fixing it?"

"Perhaps it would have mended on its own," Kirk suggested.

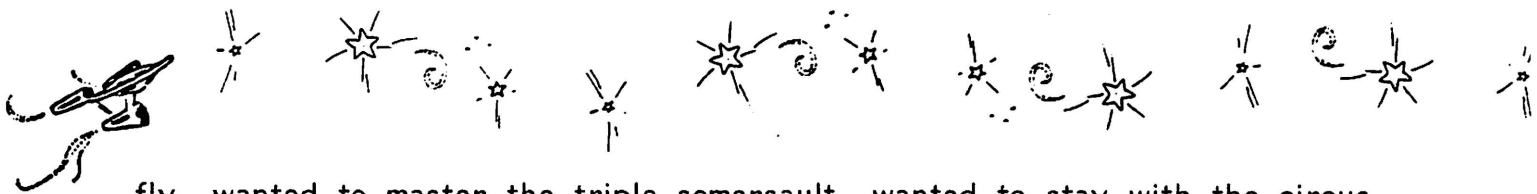
Spock shrugged. "All theory, Captain. Another is that what McCoy is doing will have no bearing on the greater scheme of things."

The two humans were silent, pensive. The enigma would remain with them as their days with the circus drew to a close.



The rapport which McCoy felt he was building with D'Arcy continued to improve, as did the boy's spirits. He still had some difficulty with the absolute authority of his father, but he at least admitted that he wanted to





fly, wanted to master the triple somersault, wanted to stay with the circus. Perhaps it was only a temporary peace -- McCoy suspected that it was -- but at least D'Arcy had passed one of the major hurdles.

Three weeks had passed -- McCoy's time was up. The three Enterprise officers talked and decided that nothing would be accomplished by extending their visit. As much fun as the diversion had been, it was time to get back to their ship, to the stars of tomorrow's skies. All three found themselves homesick and suddenly eager to be off.

They decided in the morning that they would leave after tonight's show, before the lot was struck. They would rendezvous at the supply wagon, touch the magic coin and go forward. All of their friends would be told simply that they were leaving the show.

Farewells would not be painless, especially from the Bordeaux, who had welcomed them into their home and family. Annette, Tristan and Desi were sad, but understanding. René engulfed Kirk in a big hug. He had always known that flying was just a diversion for Kirk, and suspected that the others tagged along just to humor a friend.

"I will miss you, Jim. But... c'est la vie." René clucked his tongue.

"What does that mean?" Kirk asked, curious.

René considered. "It means, that is the way things are -- such is life."

D'Arcy, who had missed the announcement, came to the trailer late. Papa greeted him enthusiastically, boisterously throwing an arm around his shoulders.

"So, then. Tomorrow you can begin once again to practice with the act. Doc says it will be good, eh?"

D'Arcy smiled thinly. "Guess so, Papa."

"You go soft in these weeks off." René jabbed a finger in his son's stomach, still playful. "But don't worry. Your Papa will work it off."

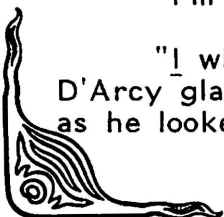
The family laughed, enjoying the joke. D'Arcy however, did not.

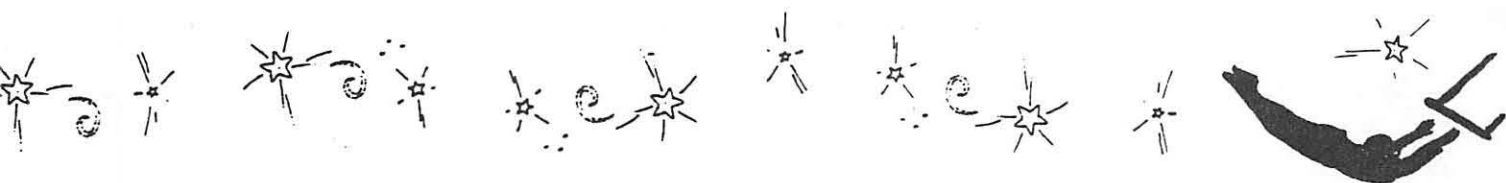
"C'mon, Papa, knock it off..." He pushed at his father's hand.

"You will work like you've never worked before," René persisted. "We will have you do the triple at every performance. The Bordeaux will be world-famous."

"I'm not ready for the triple, Papa. My arm will take months to -- "

"I will say when you are ready," René bellowed, only half-kidding now. D'Arcy glanced over at McCoy, looking for support. Then his eyes hardened as he looked back at his father.





"There you go again -- it's the same old thing! When are you going to admit that you don't know everything about everything? You're such a pompous old -- "

"Let us not forget that it was your drunken binge which caused you all this lost time," René broke in, furious now with the quick temper that was his downfall. "You act like a spoiled little brat, not a disciplined aerialist. I need no prima donnas in my act."

"And I sure don't need the harrassment I get from you! You're just a -- "

D'Arcy stumbled backward, cutting off his own words, his face white with rage. Everyone was silent, and none more horrified than René himself. Tristan took a step toward his brother, hand outstretched.

"D'Arce -- "

Rene blinked. "Son, I -- "

D'Arcy's voice was cold and hard. "Damn it! Damn you all to hell!" He began to back toward the door. "You'll all be sorry. I'll make you sorry." As he reached the threshold, he stumbled out and broke into a run. Tristan started after him.

"Tristan -- no!" René's voice shook but retained its authority.

Desi was crying. "Papa, he's upset." Tristan stood clenching and unclenching his fists helplessly. McCoy stepped toward Rene.

"I'll go after him. Maybe he'll talk to me." He met the father's eyes and they understood each other. René nodded slightly. McCoy turned. "Come on, Spock -- help me look."

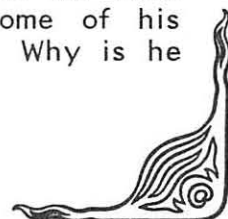


The young man had been gone all afternoon and although the family was nearly frantic with concern, they had to put personal feelings temporarily aside as they prepared for the last performance of the day. McCoy came into the wardrobe top as Kirk was dressing for the act.

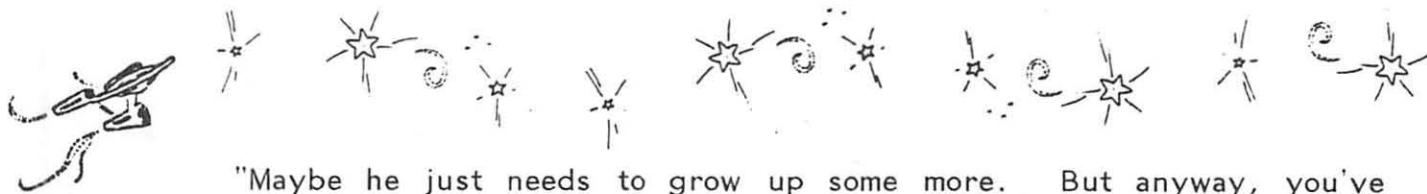
"I've been all over town and can't find him anywhere. Damn."

Kirk put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You did the best you could, Bones. He's probably just blowing off steam, again. He'll turn up."

"But why now?" McCoy would not be consoled. "I thought we were making progress. His arm is almost healed and it seemed some of his frustrations were, too. He loves flying, his family, the circus. Why is he so bent on self-destruction?"







"Maybe he just needs to grow up some more. But anyway, you've given him a second chance by saving his arm, and we've been involved more than we intended. This last show and then we'll have to leave the Bordeaux to work out their own problems. We're going home tonight."

McCoy nodded. "I know, I just wish..."

"I know what you wish, Doctor, but you've got to let it go. That's an order," Kirk added kindly.

"Yes, sir, Captain," McCoy met his friend's gaze. "And thank you, Jim."

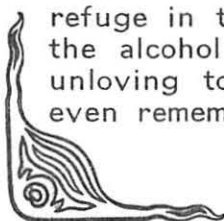
Spock came in then; he had also been looking for D'Arcy. "Unsuccessful, Captain. No one has seen him. I take it your search also proved fruitless, Doctor."

Kirk answered. "It's almost time for the performance. You two get on out front now, while I finish changing." He saw that Spock was about to speak and fielded the comment. "Yes, I'll be careful. My few simple tricks, and my career as a flyer will be ended, and I can't say that I won't be relieved to return to my real position in our own time. It's been fun but I miss that ship like hell."



D'Arcy Bordeaux arrived at the lot and heard the music for the Libertinis coming from the big top. His family's act would be on next, he knew, so he'd have to hurry if he were going to change in time for the performance. Weaving more than a little unsteadily, he hurried toward the wagon intent upon his purpose. Doctor McCoy had said his arm was fine now -- well actually he'd said it was almost as good as new. He'd told D'Arcy he'd be able to start working out tomorrow, but D'Arcy knew the doctor was just being super-cautious. Whatever magic medicine he had performed, the circus' regular Doc had been amazed by the speed with which it had been healing. The young flyer was itching to get back up on the trap, to claim his rightful place in the act.

This afternoon had shown him that. He had been running away again, like McCoy said, when he'd stomped off the circus lot. He had been hiding, afraid to face his father, afraid to go back to that role once more. So he had fled, sought refuge in the sweet oblivion of alcohol as he had always done. Only today the alcohol had been bitter and there had been no escape in this strange unloving town... until that girl... that sweet girl in the bar. He couldn't even remember her name -- Tildy or Hildy or something like that. But she





had known him, had recognized him. She had seen him perform the year before, had remembered. She had gushed how he was the greatest flyer in the world, how he made the act so special.

Suddenly D'Arcy knew what he had to do. He would go back to the act, he would fly as he wanted, and his father would listen to him. That is what Rene Bordeaux was afraid of, why he kept such a close reign on him. He was afraid that if D'Arcy ever figured out how important he was to the act, he would take over as boss. Well, D'Arcy had figured it out. He was irreplaceable, indispensable. He would call the shots from now on. He would do the triple when he wanted to...

D'Arcy quickly pulled on his tights, his fingers fumbling to straighten them.. A few more minutes... they were probably in the wings now and Jim Kirk was with them, taking his place. D'Arcy hurried out, not even bothering to put on his mules. He had to catch them, tell Kirk he didn't have to fly tonight. D'Arcy would fly himself and if Papa didn't like it that was just too bad.

"... the most Amazing Aerial Artists of all time -- the Flying Bordeaux..."

Kirk stepped out on cue, marching single-file between Annette and Desirée, Tristan in the lead and René last of all, dropping off beneath the catch trap while the other four moved to the rope ladder on the side of the perch. He twirled his cape for what he knew would be the last time and handed it to the waiting attendant. Annette and Desi ascended the ladder. Then Tristan and finally Kirk. He was half-way up when he noticed some commotion at the entrance, and glanced over, distracted.

Spock and McCoy standing in the wings, moved out as someone dressed in Bordeaux tights had slipped past them and was heading for the ring. D'Arcy. Tristan saw him too and called down to Kirk, who had paused a few steps below him.

"Jim! C'mon. Pay no attention to them. They'll stop him."

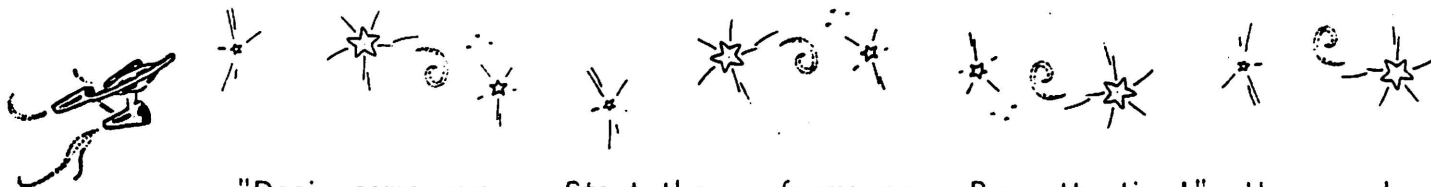
But D'Arcy had taken them all by surprise and he moved quickly toward the ladder. Kirk was almost at the top when he felt a tug from below and looked down to see D'Arcy already beginning the climb. Twice D'Arcy seemed about to slip but caught himself and continued to ascend.

Spock and McCoy had paused at the bottom of the ladder along with two other attendants, uncertain whether or not to start up after the flyer. The band was already playing the waltz and Desi was pushing an empty trap back and forth. Below, the crowd was beginning to murmur as they saw the activity going on in the ring.

Annette looked at her son on the perch. "Tristan, what is he doing? He'll hurt himself."

In the catch trap, René was unable to actively participate from that distance but he watched what was going on. He turned, calling to his daughter.





"Desi, come over. Start the performance. Pay attention!" He moved to the catch position and Desi gripped the bar with both hands, Annette holding her around the waist as she always did.

Kirk looked toward Tristan who seemed unable to decide what to do about D'Arcy. Then he called down to Spock and McCoy.

"Go back, let him come up before he falls. We'll take care of it." He leaned down, reaching out his hand. "Come on D'Arcy, a few more steps. You're almost here."

Desi had crossed to her father, done a bird's nest back to the bar and was just returning to the perch as D'Arcy also got there. Five adults on the narrow wooden plank was crowded and Tristan moved over to the side to make room. Kirk put his arm around D'Arcy's waist to steady him.

"D'Arcy what are you doing up here? You're in no condition... "

D'Arcy grinned. "That's okay, Jim. I'm in great condition. You can go on down. I'll take my own place now."

Annette was swinging the empty trapeze back and forth as the music repeated the waltz chords again. From across the ring, René sat on the bar looking back toward the family. His angry voice was hardly more than a stage whisper.

"Get him down from there!"

Tristan edged past the women to where Kirk was hanging on to D'Arcy to keep him from falling.

"D'Arcy, you've been drinking. This is no place for you. Go down and we'll talk about it after the performance."

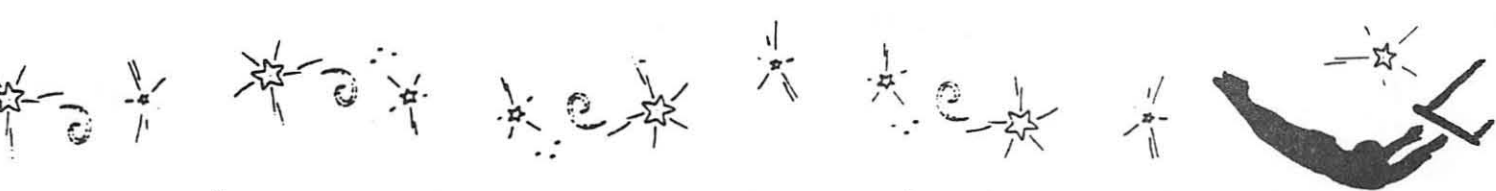
D'Arcy's leer was grim. "You're right, Big Brother, we will talk afterwards and you will see things are done my way, because you see, this is exactly where I belong. This is exactly my place. I am the greatest flyer of you all." He yelled across the ring. "You hear that, Papa, from now on I am the boss."

Suddenly, D'Arcy pulled free of Kirk's grip and grabbed the bar from Annette's hands.

"Get ready to catch me, Papa, here I come!"

As his feet left the perch, Kirk made a lunge to stop him. He managed to grab the bar with one hand but the swinging motion pulled him along with D'Arcy. Dangling thirty feet above the ring, Kirk could only reach for the bar with the other hand in an effort to get a more secure hold, but D'Arcy, surprised to find he had company, blocked Kirk's grip.





"What... You try to ruin my performance." The young flyer slipped his fingers across to Kirk's hand as the trapeze made a backward swing. On the perch, both Tristan and Desi made a grab for D'Arcy's legs but they couldn't reach them in time. The trap swung forward once more.

D'Arcy let go with one hand and pushed at Kirk.

"Get off the bar!"

Kirk struggled to keep his hold. He was not in position to fall into the net and if he let go, the sudden shift of weight could cause D'Arcy to slip, too. Two bodies hitting the net simultaneously and unprepared could be dangerous.

"D'Arcy stop it! Let me up!" Kirk hung precariously with one hand.

"No!" Suddenly D'Arcy drew up and kicked out sidewise with his leg, catching Kirk in the rib. Kirk felt the sharp stab of pain, knew he was letting go, and made a grab for D'Arcy. His hand made contact with D'Arcy's leg then slid away into the air. It was enough to make the unstable D'Arcy lose his grip as well and the trap swung away as both men fell.

Desperately, Kirk tried to make his body into a ball, head down, knees pulled up. The pain in his side made the automatic reflex impossible. He hit the net off center; the ropes which could be life-savingsly yielding if they were hit right, now felt hard and rough as the prickly kemp brushed against bare skin. He felt D'Arcy hit too, just a second afterward, the impact of his body causing a spring to the net as it shifted once more. Too close to the edge when he'd landed, Kirk now felt himself being bounced upward. He flew sidewise and the net wasn't there. Ten feet below, his body crumbled to the sawdust-covered hard-packed earth of the center ring.

In the net, D'Arcy grabbed the rope and hung on, his body sprawled in an impossible position.

Spock, McCoy and three hundred spectators watched in horror as Kirk was knocked from the trapeze into the net, only to bounce out again onto the ground. The thud of his body was deafening to Spock's ears as he stood motionless, frozen by the accident which he was helpless to prevent. But McCoy was moving toward the ring, even as Kirk dropped from the air. D'Arcy had told him how dangerous landing in the net the wrong way could be.

As McCoy reached Kirk, with Spock spurred into action only two steps behind, the circus began to move. Merle Evans raised his baton and the band switched to a lively, high-stepping tune, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. It was the circus signal of trouble, a cue to performers all over the lot. The





Ringmaster blew his whistle as a parade of dancing, cavorting clowns filled the track, their merry making specifically designed to distract the stunned audience. Even as they approached, Bradna was calling out for the people to keep their seats in an effort to avert panic.

In center ring, several men were climbing up to pull D'Arcy from the net while the other four horrified members of the Bordeaux family climbed, shakily, down the ladders.

McCoy knelt down and gently rolled Kirk over onto his back. Across his upper chest and shoulder was the angry red criss-cross imprint from the net. Sawdust clung to his hair and body. Dazed, he opened his eyes and tried to focus.

"Keep still, Jim. Don't move till I see what's wrong."

"D'Arcy?" Kirk was concerned for the boy whom he knew had fallen too

"He's in the net. They're getting him out now." He touched Kirk's arms, legs, feeling for broken bones. Spock, hovering beside him, placed a hand under Kirk's head to cushion it against the hard ground. Kirk realized suddenly where he was.

"How... how'd I get down here. The net... ?"

"You bounced out of the net when D'Arcy landed," Spock told him. "Please don't move. Let Doctor McCoy examine you."

"Damn... no way... to land. Shoulda done... better." Kirk was mumbling, pain everywhere beginning to assert itself.

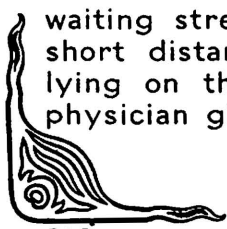
Bradna came over to McCoy. "Can you get him out of the ring or should I have a stretcher brought in?"

"No... no stretcher, please, Bones." Kirk was at once agitated. "This is a... circus... fun... scare the little kids... "

Reluctantly, McCoy nodded. "Okay, Jim, take it easy. Spock, can you lift him?" He turned. "Where's his cape? Cover him so the marks don't show." It was René who handed the cape to McCoy. Their eyes met, the older flyer's filled with grief and apology.

They wrapped the cape around Kirk's shoulders as they drew him to his feet. He grimaced against the pain as Spock took his weight, wrapping one arm around his waist and using the other to draw Kirk's arm over his shoulder. McCoy steadied him from the other side and together, by mostly carrying him, they walked Kirk out of the ring toward the nearest exit.

When he was outside he sagged and McCoy and Spock lowered him to a waiting stretcher. They wheeled him, oblivious of the gathering crowd, the short distance to the First Aid Tent, where D'Arcy Bordeaux was already lying on the examining table being looked at by Dr. Stewart. The circus physician glanced up as McCoy wheeled Kirk in.







"Can you handle him while I go over D'Arcy, Leonard? The ambulance is standing by."

McCoy nodded. "I'll take care of him." He had no intention of relinquishing Kirk's care to anyone else. Then as a second thought he remembered his other patient on the table. "How's he doing?" He felt Spock glare at him, but ignored the Vulcan's anger, while he applied a blood pressure cuff to Kirk's arm.

Doctor Stewart answered his question. "I think he's stunned mostly... or in an alcoholic stupor. He reeks of this afternoon's excursion."

"How's his arm?" McCoy watched the gauge slowly dropping on Kirk. His pressure was a little low.

"Seems okay, a lucky kid. How's Jim?" McCoy saw the same question in Spock's eyes.

Kirk was still semi-conscious, but obviously in so much pain that merely keeping on top of it was taking every ounce of his strength and concentration. His lips were faintly blue, and his knuckles, where he gripped the sides of the stretcher, were white. He seemed to be having some difficulty breathing, but it wasn't critical.

McCoy put a hand on the captain's shoulder, to offer what small comfort he could. "I'll need to run some tests to be sure but right now he's holding his own. Let's get them transported to the hospital."



At County General Hospital, McCoy ran alongside Kirk's stretcher holding the preventative IV bottle he had started. "Damned archaic way to handle emergencies," he fumed to himself, but Starfleet Service had taught him to make the best of whatever resources were available. Kirk was still partially conscious, but had remained uncharacteristically quiet and that worried McCoy.

At the door to the examining room a white-uniformed intern stepped in front of Spock, staring up unbelievably at his ears. He glanced skeptically toward McCoy.

"We're from the circus. I'm a physician." McCoy offered the brief explanation and kept moving. The emergency team gathered as McCoy barked orders. "Okay, let's get a complete bio-physical work up, brain and bone scan, and monitor for any internal bleeding. Get a life-support unit in here, too, just in case, and I'll want a read-out on his autonomic reflexes." The emergency team looked at the strange doctor quizzically.

"Come on, move." McCoy wanted no nonsense. "Don't just stand there. Are you all deaf?" At this point a large, curly-haired man entered the room, listening to McCoy's tirade.







"I'm Doctor Zayre, Chief Resident in charge of emergency. What's going on in here?"

McCoy glanced over at the Doctor. "What's going on is that your staff is completely incompetent... This man is injured."

Zayre moved toward McCoy. "Perhaps you'd better let me have a look."

McCoy realized all at once that those people probably didn't know a thing he was talking about. He was giving instructions as he would to his staff on the Enterprise, but 20th century medicine hadn't caught up to him. He suddenly felt completely out of place, with no idea of what kind of equipment to ask for. He felt a shiver of apprehension run through him as he thought of entrusting Kirk's well-being to this kind of care. It was Spock who sensed his dilemma and moved toward him while never taking his eyes from Kirk.

"Doctor, it would seem prudent to allow the hospital staff to examine your patient." He took McCoy's arm, fixing him with an understanding gaze.

McCoy took a deep breath to steady himself, at once knowing how hard it must be for Spock to stand back and do nothing. Dr. Zayre was waiting as McCoy stepped back from the table.

"Preliminary exam at the accident site revealed probable broken ribs with no other obvious fractures, normal cursory neurological examination, vital signs stable with a slightly low blood pressure and increased heart rate. Breathing is shallow, probably due to broken ribs. The main concern is to rule out punctured lung and internal bleeding. An intravenous line was opened and the medications given are..." His voice was quiet, professional.

Zayre noticed the worried eyes and drawn look about the doctor. McCoy had done an excellent job of on-the-spot care, yet there was something troubling him and he looked like someone under extreme pressure. The staff physician nodded.

"Thank you, Doctor. You may stay and assist if you wish, but you look like you could use a cup of coffee. Why don't you and your friend take a walk for a few minutes and come back when you're feeling better. We'll take good care of him."

Reluctantly, Spock tugged on his arm. "He is right, McCoy. You can't help Jim right now. We'll come back shortly."

McCoy followed Spock out into the corridor and down the hall. There was an empty waiting area and McCoy walked over to the wall, slamming his fist against it.

"Damn! It's like a museum in there. I might as well be a space-ship mechanic for all I know about practicing medicine in this century!"



Spock came over to him. "Control yourself for a brief moment, Doctor and listen." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the coin. "I have this. Can we not place the Captain's hand on it along with ours and whisk him back to our time right now?"

McCoy looked at the coin and for a second he brightened. Then he shook his head.

"Too risky, Spock. We have to see what's wrong with Jim before we can chance putting him through that. We're not sure exactly how it works or what it could do to him if he's injured physically."

Spock's face fell and McCoy understood the feelings -- fear, helplessness, anger. He was feeling it too, and one more thing -- guilt. If he hadn't insisted on staying to help D'Arcy...



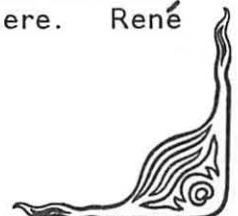
Tests, in the twentieth century, were interminably slow, although the hospital team was working at peak efficiency. Twice McCoy had returned to the examining room but it was depressing to see Kirk hooked up to little square boxes with dials and numbers spinning crazily. He was punched full of holes with incredibly painful-looking needles, drawing out blood and body fluid samples. Through it all Kirk was awake and answering questions, but he was pale and apprehensive and apparently in a great deal of pain. Doctor Zayre kept reminding McCoy that they couldn't give him anything for the pain until they knew what was wrong with him. It took all of McCoy's control not to scream at such an inhumane practice of allowing a patient to suffer while so called healers inflicted more agony with their probing and prodding to determine the extent of the initial injuries.

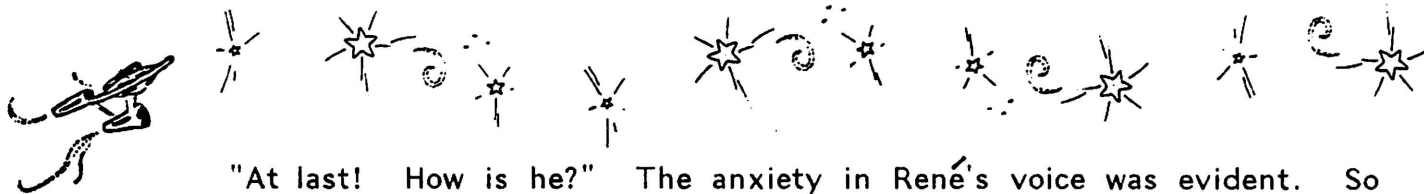
After a while, Spock could no longer stand to be in the room. He was constantly in the way, having to step aside or move away to allow the nurses, technicians and doctors to do their jobs. Kirk's fear of the treatment intensified his own, and Kirk's unalleviated pain was like a fingernail on a chalkboard to his nerves. He knew that McCoy was keeping an eye on things, at least more than halfway understanding what was going on. Kirk was being moved to an x-ray room where no one could enter but the technician, and Spock and McCoy were told they had to wait outside until he was finished.

McCoy looked at Spock and inclined his head.

"C'mon, Spock, let's take a break for a few minutes while he's in there."

They headed down the hall toward the waiting area again, but this time it was not empty. René, Annette, Tristan and Desirée were there. René and Tristan stood up as Spock and McCoy approached.





"At last! How is he?" The anxiety in René's voice was evident. So often McCoy had answered that question that the words were almost rehearsed.

"We don't know for sure yet. They're still running tests."

Annette patted the chair beside her. "Please come sit down. It could be a long wait. It is always hard to wait." McCoy remembered her youngest son and thought how brave this woman was.

"Where's D'Arcy? Is he all right?"

"He's gone." Tristan said, rubbing his fists into his eyes." He was in an examining room and the nurse left for a few minutes. When she came back, the room was empty. He must have left without anyone seeing him. I don't know where he might have gone or how bad he was hurt... He's probably confused, upset by what happened..."

Spock's eyes glittered as he fixed a cold stare on the worried young man.

"I fail to see why his disappearance should surprise you. It is perfectly predictable. In the short time I have been acquainted with your brother he has spent most of that time running away from his responsibilities. As for his physical condition, I would not concern myself with that either. After all, he managed to stay inside the net."

"You're right on both counts, Mr. Spock," Spock turned in the direction of the voice and the speaker was a rather disheveled looking young man, standing rather shakily on his feet. He had put on a pair of trousers over his tights but the spangled tank top still showed the marks from the net. One bare shoulder and arm was criss-crossed with rope burns and the same side of his face was also scraped raw. He had a cut over one eye that was tenuously sealed with dried blood.

"I did run away again... and... and my injuries are superficial. But I got outside and I walked... a couple of blocks... and I knew... I couldn't keep this up... I had to come back... face what I did... face all of you..." He spoke haltingly, his eyes brimming. "I'm... I'm sorry about Jim... I pray to God he's all right... and I'm... sorry about the act... I didn't mean... didn't think..." He hung his head, apparently unable to go on.

Tristan moved to his brother, pulling off his own jacket and placing it around D'Arcy's shoulders. "Sit down, D'Arcy. We're just glad you're back. We'll talk about it later. Just try to take it easy." As he moved to guide D'Arcy to a chair, Spock stepped in their path. His face was a study of barely controlled rage.

"You didn't mean for this to happen? You didn't think of the consequences when you climbed that ladder? Do you know what your lack of responsibility has done? You caused a serious accident. You might have killed Kirk, might yet have caused some irreparable damage. And you come back in here expecting compassion and forgiveness from those you've hurt..."





D'Arcy met the angry tirade and there was fear in his face. "I expected nothing. I came back because... because I had to know how Jim was." He seemed on the verge of collapse and Tristan tightened his grip on him.

Spock took a breath, swallowing a reply. Instead, he clenched his fist and brushed past the brothers, striding down the corridor, away from this emotional old-world family, longing for the security of the century and customs which were familiar to him. McCoy started after him, but just then D'Arcy's knees buckled and his eyes rolled back as he seemed about to lose consciousness. The physician's instincts took over and he moved to the most immediate problem.



The waiting room on the other side of the wing was dim and empty except for one lone occupant and if anyone ever looked more out of place, it was a 23rd century alien, gazing almost forlornly out of the window at the tiny pinpoints of light attempting to peek through the neon-laden atmosphere of this twentieth century town. Tristan Bordeaux entered quietly and stopped behind Spock, but the keen hearing had detected the sound and the Vulcan turned to face him.

"I wanted to call you a pointy-eared freak," the human admitted. He was answered by a raised brow. "But circus folk never mention physical abnormalities. It's the most serious breach of etiquette anyone can commit. In our world we have learned to accept all people regardless of appearance or background."

Spock nodded. "A logical philosophy."

Tristan continued. "But tonight I wanted to say that to you. I wanted to yell at you to leave D'Arcy alone, to stop saying those things to him. I wanted to hurt you the way he was hurting. If you hadn't left when you did and if I hadn't been holding on to D'Arcy, I might have punched you."

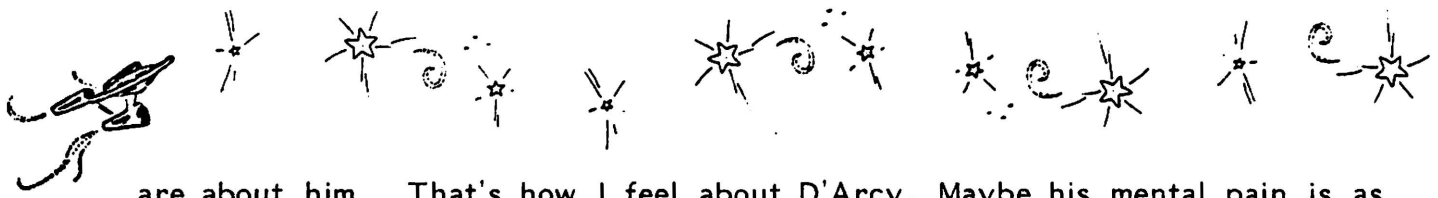
Spock turned his back on the young man and stared back at the stars without answering.

"I'm glad I didn't get that chance, because Papa made me see that that would have been wrong. He said 'He's only lashing out at D'Arcy because he's so scared for Jim.' And I knew he was right."

"I should not have said those things to your brother." Spock's voice was low. "What's done is done and blame and guilt cannot change what has happened."

"That's just it," Tristan sat down. "D'Arcy will blame himself, feel guilty for a long time. He's going to punish himself and I... I don't know how to help him. I know how you... care for your friend, how worried you





are about him. That's how I feel about D'Arcy. Maybe his mental pain is as great as Jim's physical pain and if... if something bad does happen to Jim, D'Arcy will suffer just as much."

Spock turned and looked down at the distraught young man on the couch.

"It seems there are indeed two victims here tonight."

Tristan's eyes met Spock's. "You're very strange, Mr. Spock. Oh, I don't mean your physical appearance. You're not circus, yet you're not like the average rube who hangs around the lot, or who signs on for a few weeks to make a couple of bucks. I've lived my whole life in the circus. There's a loyalty, an integrity about you -- about all three of you -- that I thought existed only in circus folk."

McCoy came through the door. There was a bounce to his step that could mean only one thing.

"There you are, I've been looking all over. He's all right. That is he's gonna be. The tests showed nothing serious. A few broken ribs, a lot of superficial abrasions and bruises, a sprained shoulder. He hurts like hell and they've finally gave him something for that. But he'll mend. He was damned lucky." McCoy sat down suddenly as the emotional tension hit him. "Damn lucky."

Tristan was grinning from ear to ear, genuinely happy. Spock's first words were expected.

"Can I... "

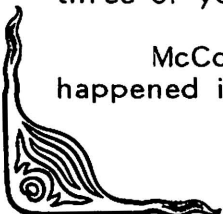
McCoy didn't let him finish. "See him? Sure, sure. He'll probably be groggy, the pain killers have that effect. They've moved him to Room... " Spock was already down the hall. "Oh, hell, he'll find him." McCoy muttered.

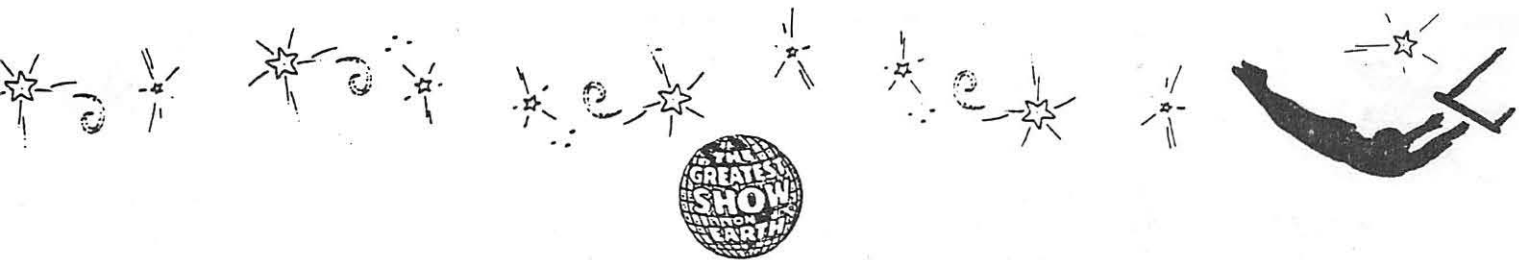
"Does the family know?" Tristan asked.

McCoy nodded to Tristan. "They were there when Doctor Zayre came to tell me." He saw the question in the young man's eyes. "The news was the best treatment anyone could have given D'Arcy. I think he's going to be okay now, too. He was seeing things a lot clearer before tonight, but something got into him today, made him go off like that. It was a hard way to learn a lesson, but I think it was effective. He finally realizes how important his responsibility is -- and he wants it, Tristan. He wants to be a great flyer."

Tristan squeezed McCoy's hand. "Doc, the Flying Bordeaux owe all three of you a lot. I'm glad you were around at just the right time."

McCoy returned the squeeze. "Yeah, wonder how things would have happened if we hadn't been." Tristan didn't have an answer.





Spock found Kirk's room. Tuffy Genders had driven to the hospital to take the Bordeaux back to the circus. They were moving on to the next town, forty miles away. Tuffy had told Spock that he would send someone in the next day to drive him, McCoy, Kirk and D'Arcy to the lot when Kirk and D'Arcy, kept overnight, were released. Doctor Zayre had made arrangements for McCoy and Spock to use the Doctor's lounge since the hour was late.

His mind on something else as the arrangements were made, Spock finally secured the number of Kirk's room and took off at once. Assured that Kirk was all right, he would feel easier when he saw for himself.

As he quietly stepped through the door, Kirk opened his eyes, grinning.

"Hey, Spock, come on in. 'Been wonderin' where you were." Spock crossed to the bed, noticing how his friend's voice slurred.

"Are you all right?"

"Huh? Oh. Oh sure. They gave me somethin' for the pain an I'm feelin' a little woozy, but Bones said it was okay -- it's s'posed to do that." He yawned. "Makes me sleepy, too. Damn shame we don't have anything like this in our century. Would certainly liven up sickbay."

"I don't think that is the intention of the drug."

"Maybe not, but McCoy's old potions just do what they're supposed to do, with no such beneficial side-effects.

Spock could see that it would be impossible to talk to Kirk in his condition.

"Perhaps you should get some sleep. Tomorrow we will return to the circus and can use the coin to go home."

Kirk nodded, closing his eyes against the lightheadedness that the movement caused.

"Yeah, I'll be glad for that." He opened his eyes, peering at his friend, "Spock, don't blame D'Arcy for what happened tonight."

"Blame is illogical." It was a pat answer.


"I know, I know. But, he was wrong, careless, that's true. He's not a bad kid, though, just mixed-up..."

"Jim, I've told you I don't blame him."

Kirk accepted Spock's words grudgingly. He was too tired to continue arguing. He yawned again.







"I will be glad to get back to the Enterprise. This century is too damn dangerous. Swinging back and forth thirty feet in the air and hospital care that's a veritable torture chamber. Starfleet Service is much safer..."

Spock watched as Kirk drifted off to sleep.

"No existence is safe when you're around" he murmured. He moved to the chair and sat down, leaning his head back, mumbling to himself. "Just once it would be nice to find someplace where you couldn't get into trouble... but I don't think it exists... in our time... or in the past..."

When McCoy came in search of him, he found Spock asleep. Kirk's ribs were taped and his arm was in a sling. Dressings had been applied to several abrasions. McCoy would get rid of all those trappings when they returned to his sickbay. On his way to the Doctor's lounge, he left word at the nurses station that Spock was not to be disturbed.




The interior of the vacant supply tent was dim, but thanks to the precision of the circus set-up team, all the contents were exactly as they had been when the three Enterprise men arrived on the lot over a month ago.

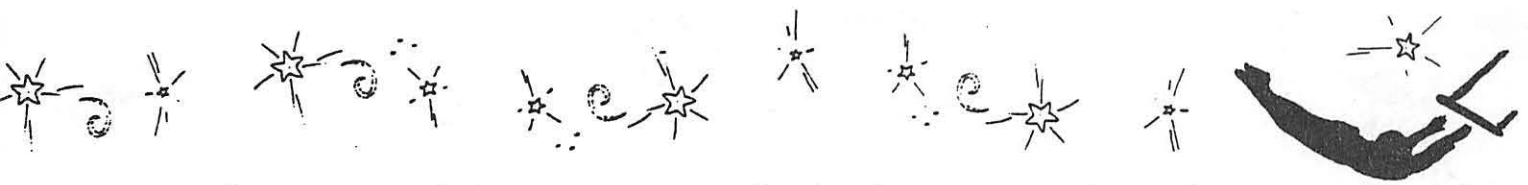
Silently Spock withdrew the Time Place Coin from his pocket and extended his hand. McCoy reached over and placed his thumb and forefinger on one edge, leaving room for Kirk.

The captain sighed and looked around. Leave-taking of the people -- friends -- they had made on the show had been poignant. Kirk's fall had upset the other performers, pulled them together and they enveloped him as one of their own. Tension might have gone on while the superstitious circus folk waited for two more accidents to fulfill the hated "accidents happen in three's prophecy" which was always taken as gospel on a lot. Fortunately, the other two mishaps had occurred in one day and had been relatively minor. One of the roustabouts had cut his arm during the early morning set-up. It had required stitches but had not been serious. Then at practice, one of the Rostov's, tumblers, had missed his cue and the human pyramid had come falling down. Luckily, the worst that had happened was a twisted ankle. The circus breathed easier; the jinx was over, for a time at least.

The hardest of all was saying good-bye to the Bordeaux. The friendly, good-willed family had assured them they would visit again, urged them to come to the show in different towns, visit their home in Florida where the circus was quartered for the winter. Kirk and Spock and McCoy had been necessarily vague, but all three had known that they would never meet again.



Kirk felt McCoy's and Spock's eyes on him. He reached out and gripped the coin. Whatever they expected to happen didn't. Except for a strange violet-tinged shadow that seemed to pass through the tent,



everything remained the same. Worried, the three men exchanged gazes and Kirk swallowed a knot forming in his throat. He let go of the coin, unable to voice his concern. McCoy looked at Spock.

"What is it? What went wrong?"

Spock's answer was a puzzled frown. Then at once they were aware of something different. The subtle sounds and smells that had become so much a part of their daily existence were gone. Favoring his injuries, Kirk moved to the tent flap and pulled it back.

Outside, sawdust had been replaced by the shiny, marble-like surface that were the sidewalks of Argus II, home planet of Time Place. Kirk grinned appreciatively as he took in the familiar atmosphere of the 23rd century.

"We made it!" He stepped through the doorway and Spock and McCoy followed.

They were out of doors, however, in what appeared to be some kind of park, not the glittery rooms from where they had departed. From down a pathway, hurried a familiar figure but this time the little man was dressed in black coat with tails, black pants and bow-tie and a white shirt. He looked completely in line with his name.

"Oh, it's you, back already," Penguin was clearly out of breath. "Such a quick trip. I barely had time to change."

Kirk put his hands on his hips, wincing at the movement but all set to find out some answers.

"Mr. Penguin, there's something I'd like to talk to you about..." he was interrupted.

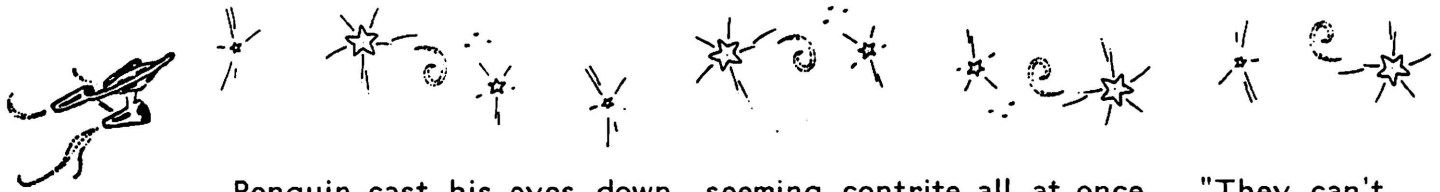
"Oh, dear, dear. What happened to you? You'd better get fixed up. Nobody's supposed to get hurt. My boss won't be too happy with me about this. Give Time Place a bad reputation."

"Never mind about the injuries. It's Time Place's reputation I want to talk about."

"Not now, not now," Penguin was very agitated. He handed Spock the silver box containing their personal things and indicated the room from which they had just emerged. "Please go back in there and get fixed-up first. Then we'll talk. You can't be out here like this, just that you came back too soon. I should have been ready and my boss gonna be very upset with me..." He practically shoved them through the door. "Please."

Kirk turned, annoyed. "You wait right here until we change. Then I want to see your boss." What Time Place is doing is dangerous. It's no illusion. You send people back in history."





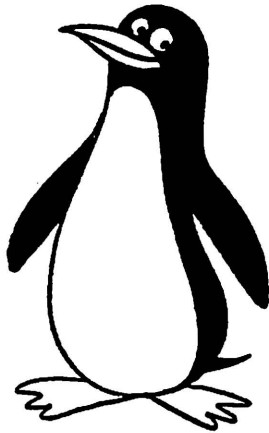
Penguin cast his eyes down, seeming contrite all at once. "They can't change it. We fix it so they can't." His voice was a petulant whisper and Kirk's anger softened.

"Maybe they can't and maybe they can. The point is... "

Spock took his arm. "Captain, perhaps we should do as he asks and put on our own things. I think we need to talk to Penguin's superior, not him." Penguin sighed in relief.

Kirk fixed him with a stern glance. "You wait right here for us."

"Sure, sure," Penguin smiled broadly.



Back inside the doorway, the room was no longer the interior of a circus supply tent; it was a plain dressing room. As soon as the men had changed into their own clothes the room was once more awash with a purple light. As the 20th century clothes they had been wearing disappeared, Kirk also became aware that his injuries vanished as well. Feeling all of a sudden completely fit, he spun around heading for the exit suspecting what they would find. He was correct.

Outside Penguin and all traces of Time Place were gone. Turning quickly toward the place they had just left, they were in time to see the remaining shimmering lines as it faded from sight. They were alone in a park in the middle of town.

"Illusion?" McCoy asked. Spock had out his tricorder.

"If they are simply shielding it from sight, they have devised a way to shield its energy, too. It does not register on my device."

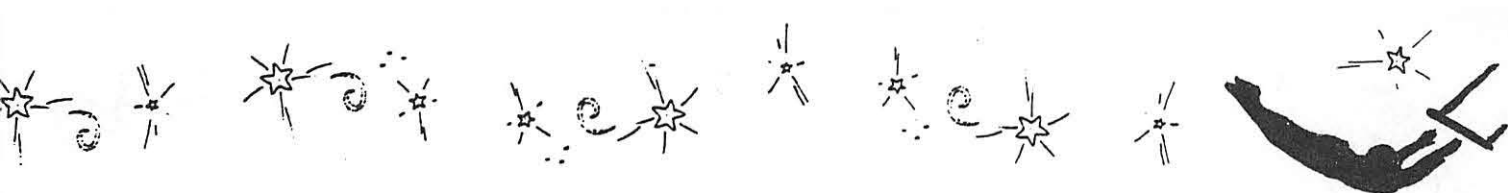
"But it does exist -- other people have gone there," Kirk objected. "We didn't all imagine it."

Spock put down the tricorder. "I have a theory, Captain. Have you ever known anyone to go there more than once?" Kirk shook his head. "I haven't heard of any."

"What are you saying, Spock?" McCoy never could stand how the Vulcan dawdled over an explanation.

"It does seem strange that as much potential as the place holds, people would be going back and forth to different time periods every chance they





had. Yet if you recall Captain Evers was vague about the place's location. I suggest that one can only visit Time Place once and that once you have made the journey, further trips are not possible. Like an old Earth legend of Brigadoon -- a mystical place that appears only once in a lifetime and once you've lost it, cannot be found again."

"More poetry than science," Kirk considered.

"Perhaps." Spock was almost pensive. "Mystical, magical, a make-believe world..."

Kirk touched his arm. "Like the circus. Let's not look under the clown's make-up this time, gentlemen. Let's just accept."



Spock strode into sickbay with a tape in his hand and a roll of paper under his arm just as Kirk was climbing off the examining table.

"Well, you're 100%, Captain." McCoy put away his instruments. "No worse for the wear and tear of Shore Leave. So you can get back to work now." He looked up as Spock entered.

"What do you have there, Spock?"

Spock acknowledged his captain first. "I am pleased that you have recovered from your injuries, Jim." He held up the tape and turned to McCoy. "I thought you might be interested in what happened to the Bordeaux so I did some research."

Kirk was surprised that Spock would take it on his own to do this. Apparently he was as taken with the family as Kirk and McCoy had been.

"Well, tell us Spock."

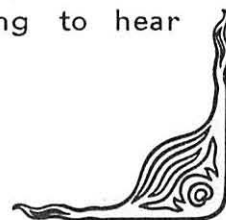
"Did D'Arcy master the triple?" McCoy thought of the anxious young flyer.

Spock considered, "Yes and no. As in any time, we seldom can know about what lies in store for us."

"Just tell us, Spock." McCoy was impatient.

"Over the winter of 1941-42, D'Arcy Bordeaux mastered the feat of the triple somersault and in the '42 season would have been one of the few flyers ever to have performed it at that time."

"Would have been?" Kirk felt a tug, like he was going to hear something bad about a friend.





"In April of 1942 he enlisted in the Armed Services of the United States. He was killed at a place called Normandy in June of 1944."

Kirk and McCoy were quiet. It was as though it had just happened, not three hundred years before they were even born.

"There's more," Spock continued quietly. "That same summer a terrible fire in a town called Hartford, Connecticut destroyed the Big Top and forced the show to close for the rest of the season."

"The Bordeaux left Ringling Brothers and Annette and René retired to their home in Florida. Tristan and Desi went to work with another touring show the next year. After World War II, Desi married a man who was also a flyer and with him and a cousin, Jacques Bordeaux from France, Tristan and she formed the new Flying Bordeaux. They performed once more with Ringling Brothers, sharing the spotlight with the Flying Concellos."

Spock handed Kirk a computer printed reproduction of a 1940 poster of the circus featuring a drawing of the Flying Bordeaux standing for their bows, arms upstretched. In the middle between Desi and Annette, Kirk stood with them, dressed in flying tights.

He laughed when he saw the gift. "How did you do that Spock?"

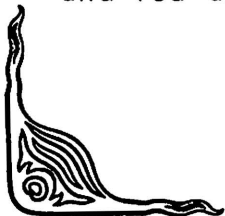
"I thought you might enjoy a memento of your trip to the circus. With a computer, all things are possible" Spock turned to McCoy who had been very quiet during his explanation of the family's future. "Doctor McCoy, your treatment of D'Arcy's arm made it possible for him to fulfill his dream of achieving the triple somersault. That he never gained fame as a result, I think, was not so important to him as the fact that he was able to do it. It was no small gift that you gave him."

McCoy nodded. "You're probably right that the fame made little difference to him. He was an impatient young man, looking for something. I don't think he even knew what. It would have been predictable that he'd go off to a war."

"As did many young men in those days," Kirk added. "I'm glad we had a chance to meet them all, maybe contribute something while we were there. I must say our "day at the circus" turned out to be quite more than that. I know I for one have gained a whole new respect for what they accomplished."

McCoy and Spock agreed.

"And speaking of which, the efficiency with which that show was set up and torn down each day was nothing short of amazing. Mr. Spock, set up a run-through drill for 0800 hours. I'll want an emergency situation, yellow and red alert, a warp drive jump; let's have a meeting with all department

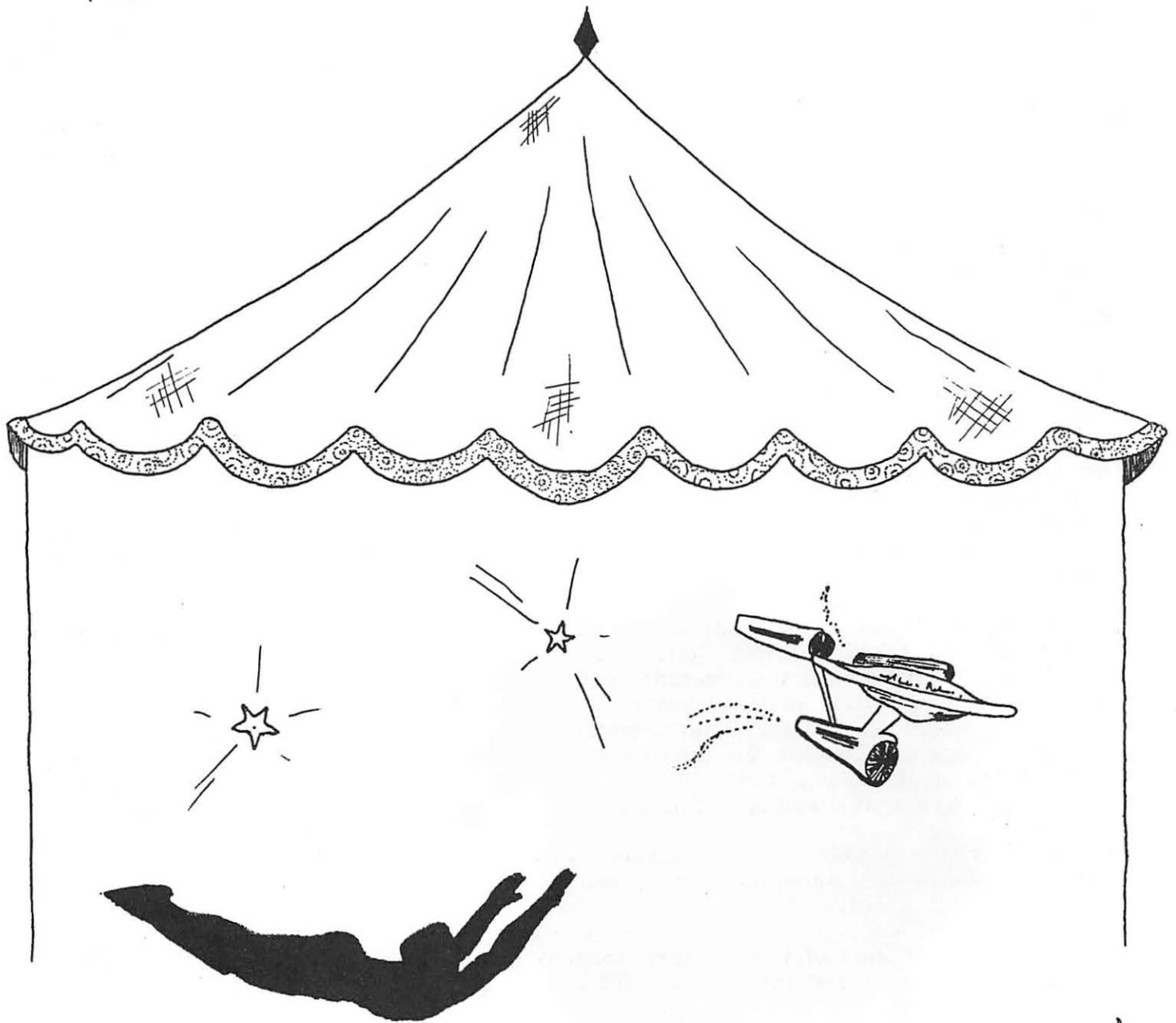




heads at 1200 to evaluate... " He took Spock's arm and headed out. At the door, he paused and turned...

"Oh, and McCoy, set up sickbay for emergency first aid -- with heavy emphasis on injuries resulting from falls... " Kirk winked and left.

McCoy looked after him. Jim Kirk was back in the stars again and soon sawdust would be all but forgotten, once more a Time and Place from the past.





# BURBS

**NOME 8** - a Star Trek zine, focusing on the K/S relationship. SASE for final information. AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED. Barbara Storey or Victoria Clark, 445 E 86th Street, New York, NY 10028

**PROGRESSIONS** is a new Star Trek zine exploring the Kirk-Spock relationship -- ranging the spectrum from friendship to K/S. Hurt/Ccmfort, action/adventure and K/S are all represented. Contributors so far include Decker, Gelfand, Hood, LaCroix, Moore, Poste, Syck and Ridener, Volker and Kippax, Fine; and confirmed artists are Feyrer, Lovett, Parnes and Decker. K/S included. AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED. Due by mid-July, 1985. Please SASE to Merle Decker, 7759 Donnybrook Court, Unit 107, Annandale, VA 22003

**ODYSSEY PRESS** publishes a variety of Star Trek fiction, with a special emphasis on McCoy. Our latest special issue is The Adult Kirk! Send for our free catalog to find out more. SASE Odyssey Press, 12529 Cate Avenue, Baton Rouge, LA 70815.

**GREATER CALIFORNIA K/S:** Color Covers by Feyrer, in the same style as California K/S. SASE for info: Noel Silva, 674 Clarinada Ave., Daly City, CA 94015. AGE STATEMENT REQUIRED.

**FESARIUS VI** contains a blend of ST, SW and SF/Fantasy material. Contributors include Knox, Heller, Bartlett, Cecil, Barr, Hill, Powers, Weston and others; art by Shapero, Cash, Swoboda, Nim, River, Bohdanowicz, Burnside and others. 150 pp, perfect bound. \$10.00 1st, \$8.50 bk insured: T.J. Burnside, 51 Joy Street #4, Boston, MA 02114. Some material not suitable for young/sensitive readers.

The #4 issue of **Galactic Discourse**, a genzine focusing on character relationships, is still available from SATORI PRESS, Laurie Huff, 709A E. Bullock, Eureka, IL 61530. Issue #5 is in the works, due out sometime soon; our special one-shot TSFS issue, The Needs of the One, is due out sometime this summer. SASE for further info.

From **Dinosaur Press**: c/o Contact-Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Road, Baltimore, MD 21206: **Contact Collected: Volume I**: selections from **Contact 1 & 2** - \$11.80 postpaid; **Contact Collected: Volume II**: selections from **Contact 3 & 4** - \$16.05 postpaid; **Home is the Hunter**, novel by B. Volker & N. Kippax, ltd. ed. reprint - \$10.75 postpaid; **The Complete Rack**, by J. Emily Vance, reprint - \$10.75 postpaid; **Contact 9**: Scheduled publication - late '85. Still accepting submissions of poetry & fiction (serious treatment of the Kirk-Spock friendship. SASE for price & availability. Checks payable to Bev Volker or Nancy Kippax.

**Kindred Spirits** - a new K/S zine seeking submissions. SASE for information, price and availability to: Sunshine Press, c/o Laura Peck, 9342 Edmonston Rd, #204, Greenbelt, MD 20770.

**Gateway II** - a ST zine of the macabra/supernatural. SASE for price and availability to: Kalomi Press, c/o Martha Bonds, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore, MD 21239.

**Vault of Tomorrow** - a ST genzine. Issues 7 (a full-length novel) and 8 now available. For further information SASE to: Marion McChesney, 3429 Chestnut Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21211

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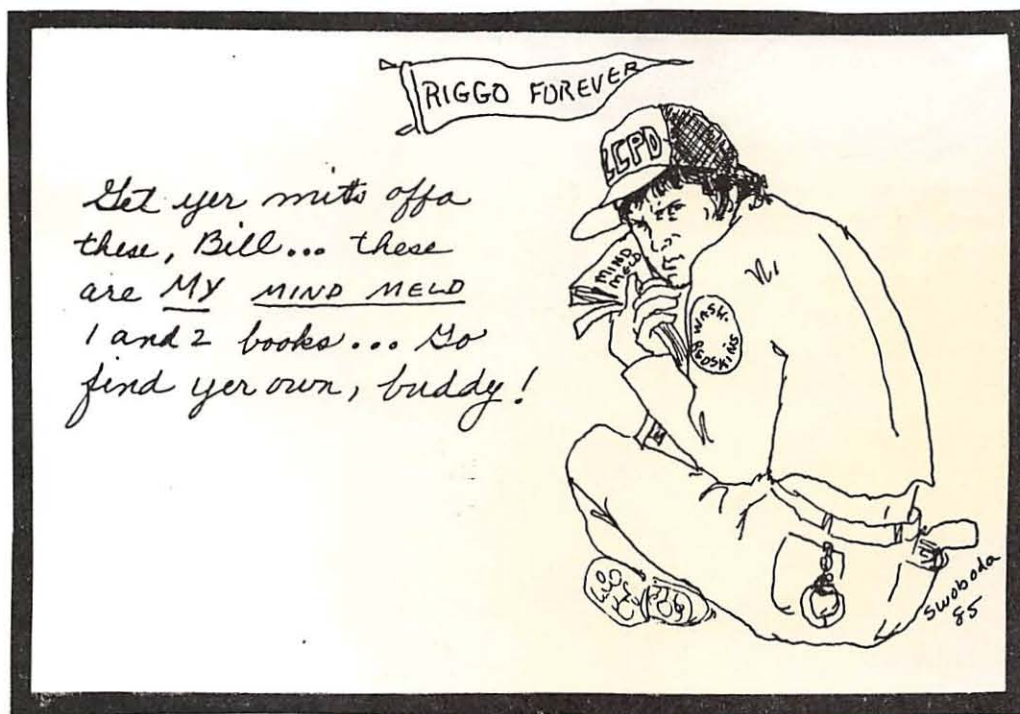
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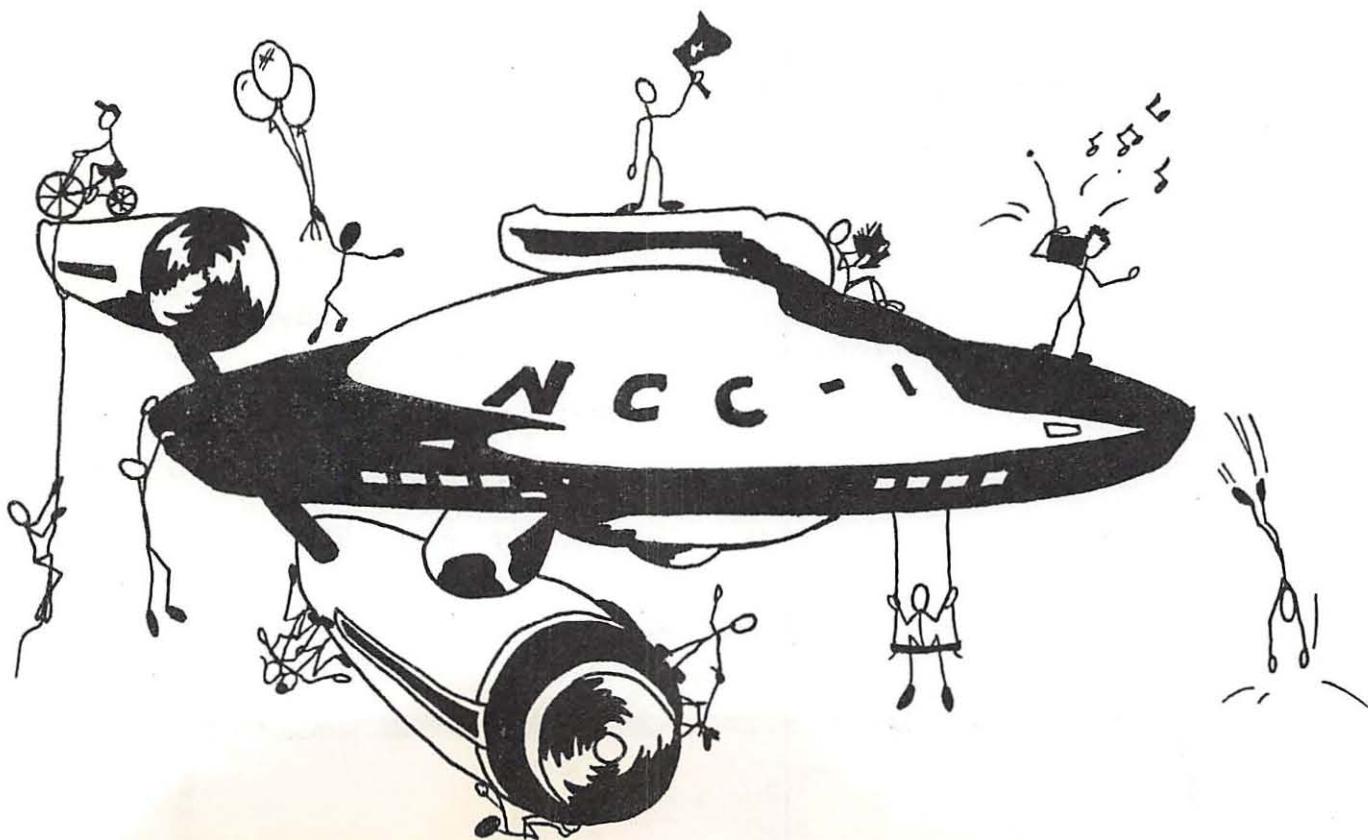
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